

# **Dissensual Operations**

***Bruce Andrews and the Problem of Political Subjectivity  
in Post-Avant-Garde Aesthetic Politics and Praxis***

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*Dissensual Operations: Bruce Andrews and the Problem of Political Subjectivity in Post-Avant-Garde Aesthetic Politics and Praxis*

ABSTRACT

The following dissertation is the first full-length study of contemporary post-avant-garde poet and critical theorist Bruce Andrews and brings to bear a decidedly post-Marxist framework on one of the most rigorously politicized and prolific bodies of North American avant-garde poetry and performance to have emerged from (and since) the Language Poetry of the 1970s and 1980s. Highlighting the singularity of Andrews's aesthetico-political stance and poetic practice (vis-à-vis other Language Poets), the dissertation offers a theoretically-inclined and broadly Rancièrean reading of key texts and performances from the 1970s to the present to demonstrate what ties Andrews's post-vanguardism to emancipatory politics. Engaging the decidedly post-Althusserian thought of Rancière, it argues that Andrews's radical rethinking and appropriation of Brechtian, Adornian, Debordian, Barthesian, and Althusserian paradigms is well suited to contest a post-political social formation that presents itself as both non-ideological and non-antagonistic. The dissertation amply demonstrates how Andrews seeks to critique and *render perceptible* the totality of late capitalist social relations and the disavowed historical contingency of today's neoliberal consensus by soliciting a 'dissensual' mode of reading/listening to the social that would capacitate the subject of that experience in such a way as to facilitate a process of political subjectivization.

Continuing the radical tradition of politicized avant-gardism, while significantly departing from both the meta-political (Hegelian-Marxist) paradigm of the historical avant-garde, as defined by Peter Bürger, and what Jacques Rancière has shown to be 'entropies' of certain postwar conceptualizations of the avant-garde, Andrews's aesthetic politics and cultural praxis instead centers on a radicalized (post-Althusserian) notion of critical reader-response and discourse theory turned poetic practice. Ironically, while Language Poetry's continued institutionalization and canonization in the 1990s and 2000s has secured a non-marginal place for Andrews's work and his role as co-editor of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the specificity of both his aesthetico-political stance and poetic practice have often been sidelined or ignored, which the dissertation seeks to correct. It thus combines and, at times, oscillates between critical-theoretical reflection, or conceptual labor, and symptomatic readings of key Andrews texts and performances, including such works as *Edge* (1973), *Give Em Enough Rope* (1987), *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism)* (1992), *Divestiture—A* (1994), *Ex Why Zee* (1995), *Blood, Full Tank* (2007) and *You Can't Have Everything ... Where Would You Put It!* (2011). In light of the formalist cliché of and critical focus on 'difficulty,' the dissertation demonstrates Andrews's montage-based work to be, in fact, dissonant rather than difficult, and to be well suited to contest a post-political social formation that presents itself as both non-ideological and non-antagonistic, where 'consensus' has come to mean the ideological eclipse of an identity constituted through polemicizing over the common.

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## **Introduction**

This dissertation engages the work of contemporary post-avant-garde poet and critical theorist Bruce Andrews and brings to bear a decidedly post-Marxist framework on one of the most rigorously politicized and prolific bodies of North American avant-garde poetry and performance to have emerged from and since the Language Poetry of the 1970s and 1980s. Highlighting the singularity of Andrews's aesthetico-political stance and poetic practice (vis-à-vis other Language Poets), the dissertation offers a theoretically-inclined and broadly Rancièrean reading of key texts and performances from the 1970s to the present to demonstrate what ties Andrews's post-avant-gardism to emancipatory politics. Engaging the decidedly post-Althusserian thought of Rancière, it argues that Andrews's radical rethinking and appropriation of Brechtian, Adornian, Debordian, Barthesian, and Althusserian paradigms is well suited to contest a post-political social formation that presents itself as both non-ideological and non-antagonistic. The dissertation amply demonstrates how Andrews seeks to critique and *render perceptible* the totality of late capitalist social relations and the disavowed historical contingency of today's neoliberal consensus by soliciting a "dissensual" mode of reading/listening to the social that would capacitate the subject of that experience in such a way as to facilitate a process of political subjectivization.

Andrews's radically "reader-centered" and notoriously "difficult"<sup>1</sup> poetics has produced one of the most rigorously politicized and prolific bodies of US-American writing to have emerged from a distinctly avant-garde moment/movement usually signified by the term "Language Poetry."<sup>2</sup> Given the theoretical-practical dimension of collective and counter-

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Haralson's *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001) situates Andrews's work "at the most radical extreme of the literary avant-garde" and attests to its "particular difficulty" as being "the source of its distinction" – a judgment which is shared by such luminous scholars and poetry critics as Marjorie Perloff and Jerome McGann (13).

<sup>2</sup> For a general introduction to and scholarly account of Language Poetry – its discursive formation and the writing and editorial practices of the so-called "language writers" since the early 1970s – cf. Lee Bartlett, "What Is 'Language Poetry'?" *Critical Inquiry* 12:4 (Summer, 1986): 741-52, George Hartley, *Textual Politics and the*

hegemonic avant-garde activity, it should be obvious that Andrews's aesthetic politics of poetic form has been collaboratively forged in the process of avant-garde and post-avant-garde praxis to a significant extent and that these contexts are crucial in understanding the work's particular poetological and political concerns, aesthetic qualities, genealogy, and development. Ironically, however, while Language Poetry's continued institutionalization and canonization has secured a non-marginal place for Andrews's work, the specificity of his critical-theoretical stance and compositional method have often been sidelined or ignored – a fact that this study seeks to improve. More specifically, and more importantly, the study confronts the longstanding problem of political subjectivity as it poses itself to avant-garde and 'post-avant' practice. It thus sets out to analyze – and to articulate conceptually – in what way Andrews's work can be said to solicit a genuinely aesthetico-political mode of reading or listening that would capacitate the subject of that experience in such a way as to facilitate a process of political subjectivity formation.

To this end, the aesthetic and political theory of French post-Marxist philosopher Jacques Rancière will be used as a point of entry for a broad theoretical discussion of Critical Aesthetics, poststructuralist aesthetic theories, and the genuinely interdisciplinary field of avant-garde studies. Not only is the relationship between art, aesthetics, and politics a highly complex one, it is also thoroughly contested. But this theoretically contested critical terrain is at the same time that of contemporary avant-gardes, or post-avant-gardes, and forms of politicized art, in general. As such, it is crucial to any study of Andrews's post-avant-garde writing and performance practice and what may be called its "dissensual operations." A key notion in Rancière's theoretical framework, "dissensus" signifies a "disagreement [*mésentente*] about the perceptual givens of a situation," of what it actually is that is given to the senses and what allows subjects to make sense of it, what can be perceived (aesthetically) and thought, and thus addressed (politically).<sup>3</sup>

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*Language Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton UP), Barret Watten, "The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L=A=N=U=G=A=G=E between Discourse and Text," *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2003) 45-102, Marjorie Perloff's most recent article on the subject: "Avant-Garde Community and the Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry," *Revue française d'études américaines* 103 (January, 2005): 117-41, and Charles Bernstein's comprehensive "The Expanded Field of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E," *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. J. Bray, A. Gibbons and B. McHale (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Rancière first introduces the notion in the context of political theory in his *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999) 28f. Further exploring the relationship between the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics, Rancière elaborates on the concept in his writing on both aesthetics and political theory, cf. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. and ed. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004); *Aesthetics and Its Discontent*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009a); *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009b); *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. and ed. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010).

Rancière's theory has received detailed critical attention and has been adopted by numerous studies on "contemporary art," film, modern music, art history, and 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. It has also been discussed by a rather assessable number of conference papers and essays on the compatibility of his thinking with current avant-garde activities and politicized art in general. However, at this point, there exists virtually no study which brings to bear Rancière's concepts on postwar and contemporary forms of US-American post-avant-garde poetry and forms of politicized writing and performance. Scholarly discussion of this kind of literature is generally framed by invoking, in one way or another, the tripartite schema "avant-gardism – modernism – postmodernism" which Rancière straightforwardly rejects as misleading with regard to understanding and theorizing what ties art and aesthetics to politics proper. Moreover, instructive references to modernist literature (e.g. Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Brecht, Woolf, Dos Passos, Césaire) are scattered throughout Rancière's work, while discussions of postmodernist or contemporary poets and writers are entirely absent from it. More importantly, however, his theoretical framework is difficult to reconcile with the various hermeneutic and semiotic approaches which dominate the field of study at hand.

The speculative question if forms of post-avant-garde praxis such as Andrews's may allow for transformations beyond the institutions and discourses of art and literature – a central concern in avant-garde studies and Critical Aesthetics – ultimately hinges on the notion of the subject and the problem of political subjectivity, which is conspicuously often ignored. More specifically, the question is how avant-garde praxis and the aesthetic experiences it provides subjects with may come to aid or facilitate processes of political subjectivization. In this context, Rancière's theory offers a cogent rethinking of continental aesthetics as a form of "dissensus" which provides for a powerful analysis of the paradoxical metapolitics of art and its complex and mediated relationship with politics. Besides the work of Rancière, recent reconsiderations of the agency-subjectivity nexus which are applicable in the context of this study can be found in the highly influential work of Slavoj Žižek, the Foucault- and Deleuze-inspired work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and the neo-Adornian approaches embraced, among others, by John Holloway.<sup>4</sup> While these complex issues cannot be comprehensively discussed within the scope of this thesis, it will be shown how Andrews's notion of the subject and of political subjectivity informs his sense of writing and performance as radical cultural praxis: Andrews forcefully rejects both charges of

<sup>4</sup> Cf. for instance Slavoj Žižek's *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999) as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004) and John Holloway, et al., *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism* (London: Pluto, 2009).

‘elitism’ and the tendency to conflate avant-gardism with experimentalism, while contesting what might be called, with Adorno, the ‘ever-sameness of the faddishly new in an administered society.’ Instead, his work expresses a profound longing for radical social transformation and critiques the political imaginary of global capitalism.

With regard to the problem of political subjectivity in avant-garde aesthetic politics – the critical exploration and theoretical reflection of which motivates the writing of this thesis – some biographical trivia about the artist under discussion are readily apparent: Bruce Andrews, besides being a writer, composer, and performance artist as well as a central figure in the formation of Language Poetry, is a leftist political scientist, who has published extensively on US-American imperialist policies and covert politics, and who teaches political economy and international politics at Fordham University, New York. Politics, or rather, political thinking, is thus inseparable from Andrews’s biography – and it may not be purely incidental that his first appearance on national television was on Fox News’s *The O’Reilly Factor* under the rubric “Outrage of the Week.”<sup>5</sup> With that in mind, this study further contributes to the larger fields of US-American literature, performance, and cultural studies, through an interdisciplinary approach to Andrews’s multifaceted artistic and political radicalism.

While acknowledging the unavoidable ‘complicity’ of all art, avant-garde or otherwise, with late capitalist modes of production and commodification, this study rejects absolutist claims à la Peter Bürger or Paul Mann that, in ‘complicity’ with the culture industry and liberal capitalism’s discursive economy, respectively, the institution of art simply neutralizes whatever political significance might be attributed to particular artworks, texts, or performances, and that the historical avant-garde’s failure to sublate art into the praxis of life necessarily condemns the entire project of various transnational post-avant-gardes right from the start.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, while the “archi-political” project of the historical avant-garde has indeed failed, and the “meta-political” aesthetic programme of both the historical and the post-war avant-gardes remains incomplete,<sup>7</sup> contemporary post-avant-garde praxis like that of

<sup>5</sup> Cf. “Bill O'Reilly vs. Bruce Andrews,” *Fox News: The O'Reilly Factor* (November 2, 2006; ‘Outrage of the Week’: 4’48”) accessible through <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCIIw2SCoG> (August 21, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, “Foreword” by Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984); Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991). Bürger and Mann, for rather dissimilar reasons, eventually agree on the futility of art as radical praxis, as will be discussed in chapter II.

<sup>7</sup> For Rancière, political philosophy has basically conceived of three different scenarios to forestall the democratic event of politics proper: “archi-politics,” “para-politics,” and “meta-politics” (cf. Rancière 1999, 61-94). These scenarios align neatly with Rancière’s genealogy of historical regimes of the identification of art, enabling shuttling-back-and-forth between political theory and aesthetic theory, as will be outlined in chapters I.1 and I.2 and discussed with respect to the notion of the avant-garde in chapters I.3 and I.4.

Bruce Andrews, as will be discussed theoretically in chapter I and argued on the basis of Andrews's work in CHAPTER II, tends to renounce both grandiose metapolitical programmes and vanguardist ideology and can be said to be properly political, as this study sets out to elucidate. Thus, the guiding question of this thesis is in what ways Andrews's work may be said to help introduce "dissensuality" into the emerging/pervading neoliberal and post-political consensus – from post-Vietnam to post-9/11 'times' – and thus facilitate political action in creating new forms of "dissensual commonsense."<sup>8</sup>

In the late 1970s Andrews harshly criticized what he considered the political naïveté of the – by then fully institutionalized – New American Poetry<sup>9</sup> and its popularization through primarily 'expressive' and confessional modes of lyric poetry, academic poetry workshops, and creative writing classes. Instead, he relentlessly politicized poetry and poetics in the United States at a time of neo-conservative backlash that would hibernate the Carter years, experience its peak in the Reagan-Bush era, and return forcefully with the Bush II Administration. Although the politics and poetics of Language Poetry have increasingly been integrated rather fluently into liberal academia and English curricula since the 1990s, with many of the movement's protagonists holding teaching positions at prestigious English Departments, the work itself remains essentially antagonistic in political terms.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, much of Andrews's work ties in with Slavoj Žižek's assertion that today's dominant ideology is one of "depoliticization" – a constant concern of his artistic practice, which can be said to match the political concerns of Rancière's theoretical project, too.<sup>11</sup> Their radical critique thus does not stop short of liberal consensus, in general, and neo-liberal doctrine, in particular. While the latter is continuing to effect a shrinking of political space, it has involuntarily conferred a kind of substitutive value on artistic practice, and it is increasingly the case that art is starting to appear as a space of refuge for what Rancière calls "dissensual practice." It continues to offer "a place of refuge where the relations between sense and sense continue to be questioned and re-worked."<sup>12</sup>

Based on the critiques and extensions of Bürger's classic *Theory of the Avant-Garde* put

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<sup>8</sup> Rancière 2010a, 139f.

<sup>9</sup> The term originated with Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (New York: Grove, 1960), which popularized the poetry of the post-war avant-garde groupings, including Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, Beat Generation, and New York School poets.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jonathan Monroe, "Poetry, the University, and the Culture of Distraction," *Diacritics* 26:3-4 (1996): 3-30; Manuel Brito, "Editing Little Magazines of American Poetry: From Poetry for Minorities to Voices of Acceptance," *States of the Art: Considering Poetry Today*, ed. Klaus Martens (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2010) 69-85.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek has repeatedly stressed this point, cf. for instance Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, (London: Verso, 1999) 187-200.

<sup>12</sup> Rancière 2010a, 145.

forth, among others, by Andreas Huyssen, Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, and more recently, Barret Watten, James Harding, Mike Sell, Louis Armand, and John Roberts, this study proposes a critical reading of Andrews's work against the background of the avant-garde's century long exploration of the boundaries of text, performance, and activism.<sup>13</sup> In its effort to map and explain the specific manifestations of: first, the modernist critique of language; second, a decidedly post-avant-garde aesthetic politics; and third, the internal dialectics of critical theory and poetic praxis, in the work of Andrews, this study employs an overarching post-Marxist framework which allows for a theoretical reflection on what Jacques Rancière calls the "paradoxes of political art" in the "aesthetic regime." While not without its limitations concerning avant-garde theory, Rancière's work on this subject is particularly valuable on two accounts: first, it provides a critical genealogy of aesthetics and politics which allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between art, aesthetics, and politics, including the historical role of the avant-garde; second, it problematizes quasi-deterministic models of politicized art that tend to construe a simple cause-and-effect relation between technique and reception without entirely jettisoning possibilities for politicized art, avant-garde or otherwise.

Another benefit of Rancière's theory is that while it provides conceptual tools which facilitate a language-oriented (aesthetico-semiotic) approach to literature and other forms of verbal art, his broader concern with aesthetics and politics as specific forms of dissensus allows for a non-medium specific approach to such diverse art forms as poetry, music, theatre, and collaborative multimedia performance, all of which Andrews has engaged in, and continues to do so, in various forms: most notably, Andrews's improvisatory performance practice in which texts are edited in real-time and in close interaction with improvising dancers and musicians such as Sally Silvers, Tom Cora, Vernon Reid, or John Zorn. Alongside influential critical models of performance such as the Brechtian and Debordian paradigms –

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Andres Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986); Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989); Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo Avant-Garde?" *October* 74 (Fall 1994): 5-32 and *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the Turn of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT, 1996) 5; Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry: Essays on American and European Art* (Cambridge: MIT, 2000); Barret Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2003); James M. Harding, et al., *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006); Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005); Mike Sell, et al., *Avant-Garde Performance and Material Exchange: Vectors of the Radical*, ed. Mike Sell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Louis Armand, ed. *Avant-Post: The Avant-Garde under "Post-" Conditions* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006); John Roberts, "Avant-gardes After Avant-Gardism," *Chto delat* 17 (2007) n.pag. and "Philosophy, Culture, Image: Rancière's 'Constructivism,'" *Philosophy of Photography* 1:1 (2010): 69-79.

and their adaptation to writing – various forms of *Neue Musik* and Free Improvised Music have increasingly influenced Andrews's writing and performance practice since the 1980s. A sophisticated literary and musical theorist himself, Andrews's critical prose frequently provides a key in understanding the social and political claims not only for his own writing and performance practice but also certain types of music, otherwise theorized by Theodor Adorno, Jacques Attali, or Paul Hegarty.<sup>14</sup> Andrews scholarship, however, tends to ignore the significance of modern music as an aesthetic paradigm for politicized post-avant-garde writing and to blind out Andrews's performances entirely, focusing instead on the complex (post-)structuralist/neo-Marxist framework of his textual practice. This study is thus intended to work as a corrective to these tendencies.<sup>15</sup>

Reading Andrews's work through Rancière's post-Marxist aesthetic and political theory, while distinguishing the neo-Marxist and post-structuralist theories that inform his poetics and aesthetico-political framework, this study will demonstrate that the internal dialectic of Critical Theory and cultural praxis is a salient feature of the post-avant-garde, in general, and Andrews's politicized writing and performance, in particular. More precisely, it investigates a contemporary recasting of the dialectical tension at the heart of avant-garde aesthetics – a tension between negation (Dada) and affirmation (Constructivism), between Adornian negativity and informalism and a Brechtian/Benjaminian emphasis on production, critical defamiliarization, and social address. Rancière's broadly New Historicist critical genealogy of aesthetics and politics suggests that this tension, moreover, is related to a constitutive tension between two opposed aesthetic politics at the heart of the “aesthetic regime of art” itself, as will be outlined and explicated in CHAPTER I.

Rancière's theoretical pinpointing and analytical leveraging, in the realms of politics and theory, of generic habits which create a world of unshakable facts by reinforcing categories

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002) and “Vers une musique informelle,” *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992) 269-322; Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi with a foreword by Frederic Jameson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985 [1977]); Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (London: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> George Hartley, Hank Lazer, and Jerome McGann, among others, all offer excellent critical discussions on the relationship of Andrews's poetic praxis to Western Marxism and (post-) structuralist thought, without even mentioning the role of musical aesthetics and performance, cf. George Hartley, “Context Needs a Contest: Poetic Economy and Bruce Andrews's *Give Em Enough Rope*,” *Rethinking Marxism* 5:4 (Winter 1992): 89-113; Hank Lazer, “‘To Make Equality Less Drab’: The Writing of Bruce Andrews,” *Aerial* 9, ed. Rod Smith (Washington: Edge, 1999) 32-48; Jerome McGann, “‘The Apparatus of Loss’: Bruce Andrews Writing,” in: Smith 1999, 183-195. For a partial exception to this rule cf. Peter Quatermain, “Getting Ready to Have Been Frightened: How I Read Bruce,” in: Smith 1999, 161-182, and William Howe, “Remeaning: Sound, Text, Space, and Song,” extract from M.A. thesis, available through <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/andrews/about/howe.html> (August 10, 2010), both of which discuss the significance of sound and performativity in Andrews's early texts. Paradoxically, there exists no study of Andrews's actual live-editing and collective multimedia performances despite the fact that they have been an integral part of his work since the mid-1980s.

that lead to a kind of ‘digestive perception’ of only the most familiar of affects lends itself particularly well to a theoretical-critical evaluation of Andrews’s poetics and aesthetic politics that does not rest exclusively on those critical theories which have significantly informed his work in the first place. The advantages of approaching Andrews’s textual practice, for instance, through Rancière’s conceptual framework, though not without limitations, are manifold: First, it helps prevent a ‘partisan’ criticism which in a circular argument uses Andrews’s however sophisticated critical-theoretical essays to ‘explain’ his method of writing and aesthetic politics (again), and to validate the political import of his work by illustrating its ‘resistance’ to any regularly available mode of reading *qua* symptomatic reading. Second, it facilitates a theoretical understanding of the type of capacity Andrews’s writing and performance tries to set into motion without having to adopt an axiomatic structuralist view of language that subjugates the domain of speech, which is of crucial importance with regard to acts of political subjectivization, to the synchronic working of the system of signs, accounting more fully, instead, for the corporeal dimension of reading and listening as aesthetic experience, which can be said to be a prime concern of Andrews’s work, too. Third, Rancière’s rethinking of aesthetics as a form of dissensus and the aesthetic dimension as inherent to any emancipatory politics, by way of another key concept in his work – “*la partage du sensible*,” which will be discussed in chapter I, warrants a detailed analysis of the genuinely aesthetico-political mode of reading which Andrews’s texts, as will be shown in CHAPTER II, solicit.

Rancière’s work very precisely points to a number of strategic problems and possibilities of politicized art and post-avant-garde praxis. While the “aesthetic regime of art,” as Rancière shows, harbors an emancipatory promise, or metapolitics, it also condemns politicized art to a certain harmlessness – to say nothing about its potential recuperation by the culture industry and ideological state apparatuses – which the socio-practical dimension of post-avant-garde praxis tries to make up for by means of collective action that creates the opportunities to build context and introduce concepts through counter-hegemonic institutions. At the same time, Andrews’s work is pointing to some of the limitations of Rancière’s ‘politicized’ aesthetic theory – its anti-sociological bias, in particular – and its anxiousness to connect art to radical critique, of constitutive subjectivity and ideologically functional discourses. While Rancière’s analysis of the “entropies of the avant-garde” is compelling, his wholesale abandoning of the avant-garde as an analytical category seems to be premature, as I hope to be able to show in the course of this study. In bringing the work of Andrews into critical dialogue, as it were, with Rancière’s theory, and the latter into critical dialogue with a number of well-established

Western Marxist and post-structuralist positions on politics and aesthetics, this study hopes to contribute to both an alternate theoretical understanding and critical appreciation of its “dissensual operations.”

#### A NOTE ON THE CHAPTER STRUCTURE

CHAPTER I lays down the critical-theoretical foundations and methodological considerations resulting from a specific encounter with the aesthetic and political theory of Jacques Rancière.<sup>16</sup> This encounter is specific in that it aims at complicating established models of studying and assessing the political significance of Bruce Andrews’s writing and performance since the 1970s by approaching it through Rancière’s theoretical framework without advancing a wholesale rejection of such models. Given the relative complexity of Rancière’s theoretical frame work, it may be conducive at this point to give a very brief outline before moving on to the structure and content of the sub-chapters.

Rancière’s critical genealogy aspires to rethink the complex relationship between art, aesthetics, and politics outside – though not without taking into account – the models provided by the Frankfurt School, particularly Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and the more recent contributions made by poststructuralist thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze or Jean-Francois Lyotard. Generally speaking, Rancière theorizes what ties aesthetics to politics respectively, how the relationship between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics can be conceived, and what discursive and material stakes are involved in different “emplotments of [art’s] autonomy and heteronomy”<sup>17</sup> – the framing of art and politics. Rancière identifies a constitutive tension at the heart of aesthetics, which frames the possibilities of art and complicates avant-garde aesthetic politics and strategies of politicizing

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<sup>16</sup> In the last few years the work of Jacques Rancière has begun to receive international academic attention. A former student of Althusser at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in the mid 1960s, Rancière contributed an important section to *Reading Capital*. However, in the wake of May 68 and a move to the new philosophy department at Vincennes, he forcefully critiqued his former teacher and collaborators in *La Leçon d’Althusser* (1974) before entering on a series of archive-based projects – *The Nights of Labour* (1981), *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983), and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987) – which basically reversed Althusserian scientism. While Althusser had privileged scientific insight over popular delusion, Rancière has explored the consequences of the opposite presumption – that everyone is immediately and equally capable of thought. Against those who argue that only the appropriately educated or privileged are authorized to think and speak, Rancière’s most fundamental assumption is that everyone thinks. Everyone shares equal powers of speech and thought – an assumption which is central to his recent aesthetic and political theory as well. Rancière’s axiomatic account of equality refuses to posit equality, or emancipation, as *telos*, in which case it could be endlessly deferred: “equality is not a goal to be attained but a point of departure, a supposition to be maintained in all circumstances.” Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991) 138.

<sup>17</sup> Rancière 2010a, 115.

art at the same time as it gives rise to them. Far from denying art's political significance, however, Rancière asserts that "returning the inventions of politics and art to their difference [...] entails rejecting the fantasy of their purity, giving back to these inventions their status as cuts that are always ambiguous, precarious, litigious."<sup>18</sup>

As will be outlined in chapter I.1, Rancière's critical genealogy identifies and analyzes the workings of three historical regimes of art, in particular, of what he calls "the aesthetic regime of art." This "historical regime" of the "identification of art," which is thoroughly paradoxical and lives off an original constitutive tension – as Rancière cogently argues and as will be explicated in what follows – emerges in the wake of the Enlightenment with German Idealism and the early Romantics' attempts to grasp and conceive under the name of aesthetics a "fundamental displacement: namely, that the things of art would henceforth be identified less according to criteria of 'ways of doing,' and more in terms of 'ways of sensible being.'"<sup>19</sup> According to Rancière, the "aesthetic regime" is essentially what identifies "art in the singular" to this very day, while still interfering with the remnants of another, historically prior, regime of representation, which he terms the "poetic" or "representative regime of the arts." In the face of all kinds of paradoxes and terminological confusions that characterize contemporary debates about the politics of art, the crisis of art, the end of art, the death of the avant-garde, and the proliferation of prefix terms like neo-romanticism, post-vanguardism, or ultra-modernism – not to mention such curiosities as 'post-modernists *avant la lettre*'<sup>20</sup> – Rancière's work aims at nothing less than "re-establishing a debate's conditions of intelligibility."<sup>21</sup>

While it would be beyond the scope of this thesis to outline and critically reflect on Rancière's theoretical work in its entirety, it is indeed possible, and mandatory, with respect to its significance and recent centrality in current academic discourse, to explicate and discuss those theoretical issues raised by his work which are crucial to a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between art, aesthetics, and politics, and suited, moreover, to provide a theoretical framework for the present study as it sets out to critically discuss the work of Bruce Andrews and enters the highly inter-disciplinary field of avant-garde studies

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<sup>18</sup> Rancière 2009a, 132.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 10. Perhaps the most important role in establishing the aesthetic regime discursively was played by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century literature – the coming into being of "literature" as such, and the emergence of the novel – as Rancière argues in "The Politics of Literature," cf. Rancière 2010a, 152-68.

<sup>20</sup> The instances of this notion in critical discourse on art and literature are far too frequent as to even begin citing them here. Instead, it may be more useful to remember Umberto Eco's assertion, in his 1984 "Postscript" to *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harvest, 1994), that "postmodern" has become "a term *bon à tout faire* [...] applied today to anything the user happens to like," and is made "increasingly retroactive," until "the postmodern category will include Homer" (532).

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum 2004) 10.

and critical aesthetics. The key concept here, again, is the notion of “dissensus.” As a conflict between a sensible presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between “several sensory regimes and/or ‘bodies’,” dissensus can be said to reside at the heart of politics, since at bottom the latter itself “consists in an acitivity that redraws the frame within which common objects are determined.”<sup>22</sup> This aesthetico-political nexus, then, is also an aesthetico-semiotic one, and the politicity of a given text or performance partly hinges on how it introduces aesthetic dissensuality into cultural representations, the signifying practices of ideological functional discourses, and consensual ways of making meaning, accepted divisions between bodily capacities and incapacities, speech and noise, meaningful sound and cacophony, and other closures of meaning.

Chapters I.1 to I.10 are thus intended to accomplish the following interrelated tasks: First, they give a brief account of Rancière’s thought on aesthetics and politics by explicating key theoretical notions such as the “aesthetic regime of art”, “*le partage du sensible*” (I.1), the notions of “consensus” and “dissensus,” which are central to Rancière’s non-deterministic theory of political subjectivity, and the polemical notion of “the police” (I.2). Second, they explicate Rancière’s understanding of the notion of the avant-garde as comprising two different ideas of political subjectivity (I.3), retrace what Rancière calls “entropies of the avant-garde” (I.4), and juxtapose these ideas with recent developments in avant-garde studies (I.5 and I.6), before outlining his theoretical account of the problems and possibilities of politicized art (I.7). Third, they discuss critically the implications of Rancière’s work for both avant-garde studies and critical aesthetics by bringing his ideas into dialogue with the Cultural Marxist tradition (I.8), before putting forth a partial critique of Rancière’s egalitarian critique of politicized art’s performative reproduction of inequality and wholesale rejection of Brechtian and Debordian paradigms, in order to arrive at a neo-Marxist sociological corrective, or critical juncture (I.9). The chapter closes with methodological considerations on the compatibility of Rancière’s framework with an analysis of post-avant-garde, or late-modernist experimental poetics, in general, and Andrews’s “language-centered” writing, in particular (I.10).

CHAPTER II approaches the prolific body of Andrews’s work in broadly chronological order. Besides offering close analyses of selected texts and performances, the individual subchapters discuss key concepts of Andrews’s thinking, from the late 1970s into the present, about the aesthetic politics of poetic form and the question of political subjectivity as it poses itself to

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<sup>22</sup> Rancière 2010a, 139.

post-avant-garde praxis. Here, it seems feasible to ask how post-avant-garde forms of radical cultural praxis, if they are to be political, may contribute to a re-opening of political space and provide experiences which may facilitate a process of political subjectivization.

Beginning with Andrews's most abstract and fragmentary writing from the mid-1970s, chapter II.1 addresses Andrews's attempt to radically re-aestheticize language by suspending or complicating reference and opening up the text for alternative ways of creating meaning. Andrews's early writing continues and extends the avant-garde models provided by Russian Futurism, Dada, Lettrism, Situationism, John Cage, Fluxus, and the radical modernist experiments with 'wordness,' syntax, and the American tongue in the work of Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky. It will be argued that Andrews's is a genuinely materialistic and performative poetics that uses intransitivity as a means to direct the reader's attention to the body as the site of language production, use, and reception, and that such awareness might very well be the precondition for any critical re-meaning, i.e. an alternative semanticizing critically aware of and resisting the dominant modes of reality 'formatting' in and through language – or rather, a specific use of language that, like capital, pretends to exits independently of and unaffected by human bodies. Besides bringing to bear Rancièrean concepts on Andrews's texts, and advancing a partial critique of some of Language Poetry's theoretical tenets, it will be argued that Andrews's radical re-aestheticization works against ideological interpellation and shows the referent itself to be politicizable, demonstrating, in Rancièrean terms, how the references of language are being partitioned up and distributed.

Chapter II.2 then discusses Andrews's turn, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, from a micro-text level to the macro-text level of discourse, his development of a highly specific technique of juxtapositional montaging of confrontational discursive raw materials, and a distinctly neo-Brechtian method that seeks to lay bare the process of semantic, and by extension, ideological framing by means of critical defamiliarization and the dissensual rupturing of consensual practice. The satirized and 'ventriloquizing' transcriptions of public speech and chunks of social discourse in these works initially appear more accessible than the earlier (non-lexical) work, while the writing remains considerably disjunctive and anasemantic. It will be argued that Andrews's work since the 1980s reveals a notion of post-avant-garde praxis which is heavily reliant on the Brechtian critique and extension of avant-garde strategy into a fully fledged social modernism which seeks to re-function the institution of art instead of abolishing it and retains both the idea of sensuous/aesthetic experience and of art as collective and collaborative radical praxis. It will further be argued that Andrews's aesthetico-political framework and poetic method are best understood as a theoretically

informed adaptation of Brechtian techniques to late modernist poetics qua Roland Barthes's (and the *TelQuel* group's) critical semiotics and concept of the "writerly text."<sup>23</sup> Most importantly, however, it will be shown how Andrews's writing effectively projects social antagonism into the reading experience thus making it (aesthetically) available to the senses. It will further be argued with Rancière that Andrews's writing contests "consensus" precisely as it facilitates new forms of "dissensual commonsense" and directs the reader's attention to what generally passes itself off for 'politics.' Both the semantic framing process itself (which is always already an aesthetico-semiotic, cognitive process) and the process of ideological framing, which demands identity, or concordance, "between sense and sense," as will be demonstrated, are no longer taken for granted but effectively contested in Andrews's work.

Chapter II.3 opens with a theoretical discussion of Andrews's intended synthesis of Adorno's aesthetic ideal of a "*musique informelle*"<sup>24</sup> – athematic music of compositionally motivated yet informal connections – , on the one hand, with a decidedly constructivist neo-Brechtian method that would allow for a more explicit social address, on the other. Since in the case of writing, or verbal performance, as opposed to music, the (linguistic) raw material almost automatically carries a social semantic charge and referential force which threatens the sensual particularities of the material but at the same time enables a more explicitly social address, collage aesthetics and informal composition, as will be shown, provide Andrews with the means to avoid resolving such tensions undialectically. Besides reading Andrews's politics of sound, and his critical model of performance through a Rancièrean lense, and discussing the significance of noise, both materially and conceptually, to Andrew's poetics and aesthetico-political framework, the chapter is devoted to critical readings of four selected performance texts dating from the mid-1980s to the 2010s. Andrews's collage aesthetics and modular compositional method – the juxtapositional montaging and editing, of socially 'charged' linguistic raw material, collected on small cards and stored, or archived, in card boxes over several years – opened up new possibilities for performance as his compositional method enabled him to improvise texts in real-time in the context of collective multi-media performances. While supporting the assertion that informalist construction offers a recognition of the opportunities for emancipating the dissonance of social tone, it will be argued that, in properly aesthetic terms, the avant-garde impulse to conceive of non-generic forms of composition and non-idiomatic improvisation in both music and writing constitutes what

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<sup>23</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1975) 4f.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*. (London: Verso, 1992) 293f.

Rancière calls the “invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come.”<sup>25</sup> Next to such properly metapolitical aspirations, however, Andrews’s writing and performance practice seeks a more explicitly socio-critical and political edge, too. Thus it will be demonstrated how informal modular composition (in which meaningful connections between materials are to be ceaselessly produced by the audience), radical parataxis, “multimplication,”<sup>26</sup> and the constructivist contextualization of the subject, are important means to solicit critical audience response and rupture the consensual framing of a non-antagonistic social whole where radical democratic politics is ruled out from the start.

Chapter II.4 then circles in again on the problem of how to facilitate, or help ‘produce’ by means of post-avant-garde aesthetic politics and praxis, the dissensual “rupture between sense and sense” which Rancière regards as constitutive of the process of political subjectivization. While Andrews’s enduring commitment to a genuinely reader-centered poetics has continually been accompanied by various forms of critical theory, his most recent critical writing engages two significant theoretical resources which have not been ‘tapped’ by Andrews before: affect theory and Kantian aesthetics. In terms of the former, it will be demonstrated that Andrews does not ground his praxis on the assumption that a micro-politics of affect, as envisioned by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, among others, is in itself capable of ‘rewiring’ the subject, as it were, in an immediate way. While Andrews most readily acknowledges the political significance of the somatic dimension of our everyday lives and works towards extending the range of affects, he conceives of “readerly *affect*” as that which “activates the political stakes for poetry,” emphasizing the task of finding an aesthetic form which would ‘create a situation’ where reading or listening “produc[es] a *relation to affect*,” thus effecting “a bigger *capacitation*.<sup>27</sup>

Following the ideas recently put forth by the work of Beverly Best, it will be argued that the challenge of politicized art and post-avant-garde praxis could be reformulated as an attempt to integrate the “production of affect” with a “dialectical shock of recognition” that would produce – through an epistemological and affective operation – an “ontological shift in the reader” to entail radical social effects.<sup>28</sup> While in no way solving the fundamental problems that politicized art, in general, is faced with in the aesthetic regime, as Rancière

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<sup>25</sup> Rancière 2004, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Andrews, “The Poetics of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,” talk delivered in the *Textual Operations* series, organized by A. S. Bessa, at White Box in New York City, September 25, 2001b, avaibale through <http://www.ubu.com/papers/andrews.html> (July 14, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Andrews, “Reader Repo,” VLAK 1, ed. Louis Armand, et al. (Prague and New York: LPB, 2010b) 97.

<sup>28</sup> Beverly Best, “Frederic Jameson Notwithstanding: The Dialectic of Affect,” *Rethinking Marxism* 23:1 (January 2011): 60-82, 81.

cogently shows, Best's model provides a further methodological anchoring point for this study. In terms of the latter, i.e. Kantian aesthetics, it will be shown, moreover, that for Andrews both a judgment of beauty and the experience of the sublime are significantly framed by, or mediated through, language and our experience of the social, but that unlike Pierre Bourdieu's wholesale rejection of Kantian aesthetics as the site *par excellence* of the "denegation of the social,"<sup>29</sup> Andrews suggests a materialist and social constructivist turn, or reinterpretation. It will thus be argued that both Andrews and Rancière, respectively, seek to lay bare the emancipatory kernel of aesthetics.

For Andrews, moreover, "the Sublime" – understood as the system of language and the totality of discourse and ideology – marks a transition from aesthetics to questions of epistemology and ideology, of cognition and mediation, and what Frederic Jameson has called an aesthetics of "cognitive mapping,"<sup>30</sup> a mapping of the social totality that would reveal its cracks and fissures. Here, it will be argued that in Andrews's writing and performances heterogeneous elements from a vast array of fields are constantly brought into play, cutting across a multitude of otherwise detached social discourses, in order to foreground the generative qualities of language, the pervasiveness of social antagonism, and the radical contingency of the social order. If there is a kind of "dialectical shock of recognition" involved, it is meant to bring about the realization that what Rancière calls "the police's" "*partage du sensible*" has to be constantly reproduced by means of a consensual practice that negates its own contingency. By means of numerous examples from Andrews's writing and performance, it will be demonstrated how contesting such practice through "dissensual operations" can help reveal this contingency, thus countering the increased depoliticization of the entire public and social sphere.

Since the dissertation project engages the work of a contemporary US-American poet and critical theorist, the study's conclusion and discussion is supplemented by a comprehensive and theoretically-inclined scholarly interview (Appendix), which has been conducted with Bruce Andrews as part of this research project.

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007 [1977]). 485ff.

<sup>30</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1990) 347-57.

## I AESTHETICS AND POLITICS AS FORMS OF DISSENSUS: JACQUES RANCIÈRE, CRITICAL AESTHETICS, AND AVANT-GARDE STUDIES

### I.1 A Critical Genealogy of Aesthetics and Politics

Rancière's work forcefully reminds the reader, perhaps most importantly, that "art" and "politics" are contingent notions. This contingency, then, accounts for the need to identify "historical regimes" that have shaped our thinking about art and politics, and of which Rancière has come to identify three such regimes: a) the "ethical regime of images", the archetype of which can be found in Plato's *Republic* – the ideal state in which images would shape and embody the ethos of the community and a ban is put on the 'mimetic arts' – and which has, indeed, very little to do with contemporary notions of art; b) the "poetic" or "representative regime of the arts", which through the concept of *mimesis* defined "the arts" as a regulated relation between ways of doing and a way of being which is affected by it – what is signaled by the couple *poiesis/aisthesis*, first elaborated in Aristotle's *Poetics*; and c) the "aesthetic regime of art," the emergence of which Rancière's genealogy traces back to the exemplary case of Schiller's political reading of Kant's third Critique in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.<sup>31</sup>

The "aesthetic regime of art" is a system, or order, of the identification of art according to a specific mode of being of art-objects tied to a specific sensorium that affects what Rancière calls "*le partage du sensible*"<sup>32</sup> – a key concept in both Rancière's aesthetic and political theory – which in its most general expression can be understood as: "The system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it."<sup>33</sup> It is a challenging concept which variously has been translated as "partition," "division," or "distribution" of the sensible, where "sensible" signifies both what is available to the "senses" and thus perceptible and what makes "sense" within a hegemonic regime of meaning (and according to established ways of making meaning). The term refers at once to the conditions for sharing that establish the contours of a collectivity (i.e. "*partager*" as sharing) and to the

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Friedrich von Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967 [German original, 1795])

<sup>32</sup> Cf. esp. Rancière 1999, 57-60, 124-5; Rancière 2004, 12-13, 42-45, 85.

<sup>33</sup> Rancière 2004, 12.

sources of disruption or dissensus of that same order (i.e. “*partager*” as separating), as will be further explicated in chapter I.2. “In every respect,” as Davide Panagia notes, “a *partage du sensible* is a liminal term that is at once central to Rancière’s analyses of the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics.”<sup>34</sup> Panagia further notes that the meaning of the concept in Rancière’s work is “irreducible to an external structural arrangement that imposes form and function upon heterogeneous elements, [it is not circumscribed] to an analysis of an external objective reality like a discursive formation or an ideological apparatus.”<sup>35</sup> Rather, the phenomenological, aesthetic, and political challenge of Rancière’s notion of a *partage du sensible* is to introduce the possibility of discomposing the inequalities that such structures produce since without that possibility politics would not be thinkable. Politics, for Rancière, is always an aesthetic activity not because there is a specific aesthetic to politics nor because there is a purposiveness to aesthetic objects that is political, but because within any specific social arrangement there are words and images in constant circulation whose proper order is a perpetual source of disagreement. However, although a *partage du sensible* generates the conditions for circulation and for the production of meaning, these sensible intensities may disrupt that ordered configuration by introducing

lines of fracture and disincorporation into imaginary and collective bodies [...]. They form, in this way, uncertain communities that contribute to the formation of enunciative collectives that call into question the distribution of roles, territories, and languages. In short, they contribute to the formation of political subjects that challenge the given distribution of the sensible.<sup>36</sup>

For Rancière, the simultaneity of “the sensible” as what addresses the correspondence between the reasonable and the perceptible thus implies a condition of knowledge. The discursive and material formation of aesthetics as a regime of the identification of art and as a specific *partage du sensible* – sometimes referred to by Rancière as “the aesthetic revolution”<sup>37</sup> – further coincides, historically, with the birth of the idea of aesthetic autonomy. The latter is a notion which is frequently misunderstood, as Rancière emphasizes. By regarding “aesthetic autonomy” as the idea of certain bodily capacity and thus distinct from the more common (Marxist) notion of a “relative autonomy” of “art,” “literature,” or more

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<sup>34</sup> Davide Panagia, “‘Partage du Sensible’: The Distribution of the Sensible,” *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Philippe Deranti (Durham: Acumen, 2010) 97.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 101.

<sup>36</sup> Rancière 2004, 39f.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Rancière 2010a, 115-133.

general, the “cultural sphere,” Rancière brings the idea of aesthetic autonomy proper, as it were, back to the focus of critical theory.

The aesthetic suspension of the supremacy of form over matter and of activity over passivity [in Schiller’s account] makes itself thus into the principle of a more profound revolution, a revolution of sensible existence itself and no longer only of the forms of State. It is therefore as an autonomous form of *experience* [my emphasis] that art concerns and infringes on the political partition of the sensible. The aesthetic regime of art institutes the relation between forms of identification of art and the forms of political community in such a way as to challenge in advance every opposition between autonomous art and heteronomous art, art for art’s sake and art in the service of politics, museum art and street art. For aesthetic autonomy is not that autonomy of artistic ‘making’ celebrated by modernism. It is the autonomy of a form of sensory experience.<sup>38</sup>

Aesthetics, according to Rancière’s reading of Schiller, is essentially a form of “dissensuality” – a perceptual dissociation or rupture in the relationship between sense and sense.<sup>39</sup> Rancière repeatedly refers to Schiller’s founding text of aesthetic politics as defining a specific mode of living in the sensible world – an emancipatory metapolitics.<sup>40</sup> Historically, this mode was set against the degeneration of political revolution, where possibilities were exhausted and lacked energy as they were closed down and blocked by a dominant order. Some one hundred and fifty years after the French Revolution, Adorno made a similar – if decisively more skeptical – meta-political maneuver when he saw the very possibility of aesthetic experience, “the heterogeneous sensible,” and the “non-identical” threatened on all fronts: by Fascism, Stalinism, and the culture industry. But the dissensual operations effected by aesthetics cannot be brought to rest and permanently secured as a site of absolute resistance to a social outside. Investigating what he calls “emplacements of autonomy and heteronomy,”<sup>41</sup> Rancière asks: “[h]ow can the notion of ‘aesthetics’ as a specific site of experience lead at once to the idea of a pure world of art and of the self-suppression of art in life, to the tradition of avant-garde

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<sup>38</sup> Rancière 2009a, 32.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. for instance Rancière 2010a, 143f; Rancière 2004, 65; Panagia in: Deranti 2010, 98ff. The notions of dissensuality and dissensus, which obviously play on the semantic ambivalence between sense (perception), on the one hand, and (making) sense, on the other, as well as their dissociation, are a central component of both Rancière’s aesthetic and political theoretical framework and will be explicated further in the following sub-chapter.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Friedrich von Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967 [German original, 1795]).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Rancière 2010a, 115ff.; Rancière’s notion of “emplacement” parallels Hayden White’s use of the same term in his work on historiography, cf. “Foreword by Hayden White” in: Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994) vii-xx.

radicalism and to the aestheticization of common existence?”<sup>42</sup> The answer to this seemingly paradoxical state of things, Rancière suggests, is to be found in the threefold relation Schiller sets up in what Rancière calls the “original scene” of aesthetics:

First, the autonomy staged by the aesthetic regime of art is not that of the work of art but of a mode of experience. Second, the ‘aesthetic experience’ is one of heterogeneity, such that, for the subject of that experience, it is also the dismissal of a certain autonomy. Third, the object of that experience is ‘aesthetetic,’ insofar as it is not, or at least not only, art.<sup>43</sup>

For Rancière, to understand the politics of aesthetics, i.e. the politics proper to the aesthetic regime of art, thus means “to grasp the way that autonomy and heteronomy are originally linked in Schiller’s formula.”<sup>44</sup> Aesthetics, as a paradoxical regime of the identification of art, while identifying art in the singular, at the same time effects the blurring of the boundaries between art and non-art. Furthermore, to complicate the matter decisively, Rancière notes that Schiller’s formula can, of course, be read differently and thus gives way to the “interplay” between “three major scenarios.”

Art can become life. Life can become art. And art and life can exchange their properties. These three scenarios yield three configurations of the aesthetic, emplotted in three versions of temporality. According to the logic of the *and*, each is also a variant of the politics of aesthetics, or what we should rather call its ‘metapolitics’ – that is, its way of producing its own politics, proposing to politics re-arrangements of its space, re-configuring art as a political issue or asserting itself as true politics.<sup>45</sup>

While these “scenarios” will receive further attention in the following sub-chapters, it is important to note at this point that accordingly, Rancière suggests, Marx’s meta-political notion of a revolution which would be “no longer merely ‘formal’ and ‘political,’ [but which will] be a ‘human’ revolution” can be considered “an offspring of the aesthetic paradigm.”<sup>46</sup> In fact, this is the very *raison d’être* according to which “the Marxist vanguard and the artistic avant-garde converged in the 1920s, since each side was attached to the same programme: the construction of new forms of life in which the self-suppression of politics matched the self-

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<sup>42</sup> Rancière 2010a, 116f.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 116.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 119.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 120.

suppression of art.”<sup>47</sup>

Given Rancière’s declared intention to theorize and “reinterpret class-struggle from a political point of view,” and develop an anti-essentialist and economically non-deterministic theory of political subjectivity<sup>48</sup>, it is obvious that such metapolitical scenarios are not beneficial to theorizing the process of political subjectivization without relying on “the metapolitical affirmation according to which the system is endowed with a truth that has its own effectivity.”<sup>49</sup> In contradistinction to metapolitics, politics always comes as a kind of exception to the way in which, generally, communities are gathered – an interruption: “There are factual communities, grounded in the power of birth or money, and there is politics as the process of challenging the meaning of these factual communities through the operation of declassification.”<sup>50</sup> Rancière, by contrast, understands “class struggle,” above all, “as the power of declassification,” resisting simultaneously Marxist orthodoxies and the “replacement of the proletariat by a multiplicity of minorities” on the basis that this is “not a choice between a ‘big’ subject and a multiplicity of little subjects” but rather between “an additive and a subtractive way of counting the political subjects, between the pluralisation of identities and the universality of disidentification.” Hence,

What is important in politics as class struggle is political subjectification, that is, not only the fact

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<sup>47</sup> Rancière 2010a, 120.

<sup>48</sup> Rancière develops this idea at its most elaborate in his *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (1999), arguing that political philosophy has basically conceived of three different scenarios to forestall the democratic event of politics proper: “archi-politics,” (Plato) “para-politics,” (Aristotle) and “meta-politics” (Marx) (cf. Rancière 1999, 61-94). It is, of course, not coincidental that these scenarios align neatly with Rancière’s genealogy of historical regimes of the identification of art, enabling shuttling-back-and-forth between political theory and aesthetic theory, labor/political history and art history. While it is not necessary for the present study to rehearse Rancière’s argument in full here, the following excerpt from a 2003 interview published in *Historical Materialism* is, in fact, helpful and clarifies Rancière’s use of Marx: “In the young Marx, there is a kind of debasement of politics, politics for him being only superstructural appearance, and the real thing being the subterranean process of class war. I tried to overturn the position by appropriating for myself the enigmatic sentence of the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* where he writes that the proletariat is a class of society that is not a class of society, and is actually a ‘class’ that entails the dissolution of all classes. The question is: what does this mean, how do you think of this class which is not a class? In the same text, Marx makes the proletariat akin to a kind of chemical or biological idea of dissolution. The proletariat is thought as the process of the decomposition of old classes. From this point on, Marxism oscillated between a negative idea of class as dissolution and a positive idea of class as identity. And, ultimately, this second sense, the proletariat as a positive class of labour, obviously became the mainstream sense of class in Marxism. I tried to put differently this process of ‘dissolution’. It is not a matter of the historical and quasi-biological decomposition of old classes. I rather think this dissolution as a symbolic function of declassing. The class that is not a class thus becomes an operator of declassification. The proletariat is no longer a part of society but is, rather, the symbolic inscription of ‘the part of those who have no part’, a supplement which separates the political community from any count of the parts of a society. *The idea of the dissolving class can thus give the concept of what constitutes a political subject* [my emphasis].” Jacques Rancière in: Max Blechman et al., “Democracy, Dissensus, and the Aesthetics of Class Struggle.” *Historical Materialism* 13:4 (2005): 285-301. 287.

<sup>49</sup> Rancière 2010a, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Rancière 2003, 29.

of the action of minorities, the action of groups, but the creation of what I call empty names of subjects. What was the proletariat? The proletariat was an empty name for a subject – for anyone, for counting anyone.<sup>51</sup>

Accordingly, for Rancière, “the most effective political subjects were those subjects that involved a strong identity, and *therefore* [my emphasis], a strong process of disidentification, and the possibility of transferring the power of identity to the power of disidentification and the power of universal subjectification.” If this conjures up, or echoes somewhat strangely, Adorno’s insistence that ‘our’ only option is “to use the force of the subject to break through the deception of constitutive subjectivity,”<sup>52</sup> that is because Rancière’s notion of a “strong identity” is twice removed from the pitfalls of identity thinking and liberal identity politics since it is the process of disidentification (from dominant social categories) which sets the process of individuation and political subjectivization in motion. Significantly, Rancière’s concern in his writing on aesthetics and politics with ‘acts of subjectivization’ emerges in the wake of philosophy’s staging of the dissolution of the subject through difference. It should be obvious thus that it is not a return to a Cartesian certainty of the ego or the autonomy of the bourgeois subject. Rather, his is a concern with the production of a singular interruption of the dominant order in which a subject is brought to occur – a political subject that is brought about rather than a subject that is given, assumed and general.

Unlike poststructuralist political thinkers such as Lyotard or Deleuze, Rancière considers problematic the fact that “when those class subjects disappear, what in fact we have generally is either the kinds of identities that cannot lend themselves to processes of disidentification, or [...] some kind of residuals of the universal subjects.” While the former lend themselves to contemporary forms of identity politics and its proliferation since the 1990s, especially perhaps in the United States, the latter are described by Rancière as “a kind of volatile universal subjects – subjects that operate under a banner, or sign, like “we are all German Jews,” or “we are all children of immigrants,” in which case “a disidentification is declared – precisely, the absence of difference – that is not given the name and the consistency of a dissensual subject.”<sup>53</sup> Such volatile universal subjects, if considerably less effective at first

<sup>51</sup> Rancière, in: Blechman et al. 2005, 298.

<sup>52</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973) xx.

<sup>53</sup> By “the name and the consistency of a dissensual subject” Rancière refers to what he understands as the emergence of a political subject proper such as “the proletariat” or “the people,” which addresses a “wrong” and engages in politics as “the polemical verification of equality.” cf. Rancière 2010a, 91ff. From the Greek *demos* to the East German crowd’s chanting “We are *the* people!” in 1989 (as opposed to the exclusionary nationalist notion of “*a* people”) to the Egyptians on the streets of Cairo in the spring of 2011, at the time I am writing this, the notion of “the people,” or the *demos*, has “stood for universality not because it covered the majority of the

sight, polemically entertain and thus validate the idea of universality (and solidarity) essential to a radical democratic politics, as Žižek puts it, by “identifying universality with the point of exclusion”<sup>54</sup> in a hierarchical order.

If, as Rancière’s theoretical account of political subjectivity suggests, politics today is played out in the relation between these volatile subjects of disidentification, on the one hand, and identity groups, on the other, it is of immediate significance with respect to the problem of political subjectivity in avant-garde aesthetic politics, how political artists like Andrews position their work in relation to this shifting political terrain. More specifically, what modes of subjectivization might be facilitated by different forms of art? Which is to ask how, by what specific means, artworks, literary texts, or performances may solicit genuinely aesthetico-political modes of reading, or listening, setting capacities in motion which in turn facilitate political dissensus?

Political subjectivity, according to Rancière can only occur within an open field of possibilities, one open to the exception, the excluded part – an idea that is central to the discourse of radical democracy theory. In this context, aesthetic experience is of immediate political concern as it “modifies sensory perception of what is common to the community” and thus has a political effect to the extent “that the loss of destination that it presupposes disturbs the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is no rhetorical persuasion about what has to be done. Nor is it the framing of a collective body.”<sup>55</sup> Rather, it is what Rancière calls a “multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible [that] allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation.” In order to better understand this Deleuzian-sounding formulation<sup>56</sup>, it

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population, nor because it occupied the lowest place within the social hierarchy, but because it had no proper place within this hierarchy, but was a site of conflicting, self-cancelling determinations – [...] a site of performative contradictions” (Žižek 1999, 224f.).

<sup>54</sup> Žižek 1999, 224.

<sup>55</sup> Rancière 2004, 40.

<sup>56</sup> Deleuze and Guattari have famously argued, in *What is Philosophy?*, that artists and writers create new affects and percepts by means of writing, painting, or music, which “wrest[s] the percept from the perceptions, the affect from affections, the sensation from opinion” in order to create anew “that which constitutes tone, health, becoming, a visual and sonorous bloc.” Moreover, that “bloc” is identified with “the earth’s song and the cry of men and women” as well as “their constantly resumed struggle,” and the “success of a revolution” which “resides only in itself, precisely in the vibrations, embraces and openings it gives to men and women at the moment of its making and that composes in itself a monument in the constant process of becoming, like those tumuli to which each new traveller adds a stone.” From a Rancièrean perspective, this is deeply problematic since Deleuzian vitalism confers to art an immanent power which emanates from the artist’s exposure to an excess of that power: “For Deleuze, the power (*puissance*) of artistic dissensus cannot be expressed in the simple gap between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*. It must be the power communicated by the excessive power of an *aisthesis*, which is to say, in essence, the power of an ontological difference between two orders of reality. The artist, is one who finds him or herself exposed to the excess of the power of the pure sensible, of inhuman nature. And the

is crucial to first examine and elucidate Rancière's specific understanding of both aesthetics and politics as forms of dissensus.

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work that tears the percept from the perceptions is the effect of an exposure to this excess of power" (Rancière 2010a, 180f.).

## I.2 Dissensus versus Consensus, or, “Politics” versus “Police”

In *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Rancière introduces the term “police” to refer to “the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution.”<sup>57</sup> “Politics,” by contrast, is “an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration.”<sup>58</sup> Accordingly, for Rancière, politics is not a matter of what people demand or receive, nor the exercise of power, and not a matter of the institutional creation of just social arrangements either.<sup>59</sup> Rather, it is a matter of what people do that challenges the hierarchical order of a given set of social arrangements and therefore in the process constitutes a political subject. To challenge a hierarchical order, a given “distribution [and partition] of the sensible” secured by *la police*, is to act under the presupposition of equality. Such action, if it is political, will disrupt not only the power arrangements of the social order, but also its perceptual and epistemic underpinnings, the obviousness and naturalness that attaches to the order. Such a disruption is what Rancière calls a political “dissensus.”

Dissensus, then, in Rancière’s theoretical framework means “disagreement about the perceptual givens of a situation,” of what it actually is that is given to the senses, what can be perceived and experienced (aesthetically) and thus addressed (politically). What is signified by the notion of dissensus is not merely a disagreement about the justice of particular social arrangements. More fundamentally, it is at the same time the revelation of the historical contingency of the entire perceptual and conceptual order in which such arrangements are embedded – the historical contingency of a given “distribution of the sensible.”

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<sup>57</sup> Rancière 1999, 28f. Here, Rancière further differentiates “the police” conceptually from the Althusserian notion of “[ideological] state apparatuses” as follows: “I do not, however, identify the police with what is termed the ‘state apparatus.’ The notion of a state apparatus is in fact bound up with the presupposition of an opposition between State and society in which the state is portrayed as a machine, a ‘cold monster’ imposing its rigid order on the life of the society. This representation already presupposes a certain ‘political philosophy,’ that is, a certain confusion of politics and the police. The distribution of places and roles that defines a police regime stems as much from the assumed spontaneity of the social relations as from the rigidity of state functions.”

<sup>58</sup> Rancière 1999, 29f.

<sup>59</sup> Rancière justifies this terminology as follows: “Let me be clear on this point. I don’t purport to clear up the stage of what is usually called ‘the political.’ I don’t brush aside power or government institutions. [...] I only said that politics is something else, a specific practice of configuring the common world – the polemical world – of framing identity and alterity.” Jacques Rancière, “Comment and Responses,” *Theory & Event* 6:4 (2003) <[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v006/6.4ranciere.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v006/6.4ranciere.html)> (March 10, 2010).

Consensus, on the other hand, as Rancière understands it, is defined by the “idea of the proper” and the partitioning and distribution of places of the proper and improper that it implies.<sup>60</sup> This very idea serves to separate out the political from the social, art from culture, culture from commerce and that defines hierarchical distributions where everyone’s speech is determined in terms of their proper place and their activity in terms of its proper function, without remainder. By the matching of a *poeisis* or way of doing, with an *aisthesis*, or horizon of affects, the logic of consensus entails the supposition of an identity between sense and sense, between a fact and its interpretation, between speech and its account, between a factual status and an assignation of rights, and so forth. Rather than signifying “a mode of governing that, in order to avoid conflicts, appeals to expertise, arbitration and the agreement of the respective parts of a population,” “consensus,” for Rancière, refers to that which is ‘censored’ from the script of policy making – a kind of post-political apriori:

[C]onsensus is an agreement between sense and sense, in other words between a mode of sensory presentation and a regime of meaning. Consensus, as a mode of government, says: it is perfectly fine for people to have different interests, values and aspirations, nevertheless there is one unique reality to which everything must be related, a reality that is experienceable as a sense datum and which has only one possible signification.<sup>61</sup>

One may recognize in this notion of consensus the decidedly post-political logic of liberal pluralism and the neo-liberal market imperative of global capitalism. Although Rancière generally eschews political economy and socio-economic inquiry, he emphasizes that today the context that is invoked most frequently to “enforce the ideas and practices pertaining to ‘consensus’ is [...] ‘economic globalization.’ Precisely for the reason that it presents itself as a global development that is clear-cut and irrefutable, regardless of one’s opinions about it – good or bad!”<sup>62</sup> By contrast, the logic of dissensus consists in the demonstration of a certain ‘impropriety’ which “disrupts the identity and reveals the gap between *poeisis* and *aisthesis*,” what is given to the senses and according to what regime of identification, or meaning, one makes sense of it.<sup>63</sup>

The singularity of both politics and aesthetics consists in a blurring of boundaries: “Doing art [in the aesthetic regime] means displacing art’s borders, just as doing politics means

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Rancière 2010a, 2f.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Rancière 2010a, 17f.

displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as *the political*.<sup>64</sup> This also forms a counter-dispositif of “re-distributions of the sensible” in and through art avant-garde activity in its endeavor to effect. The question remains, however, in what way and by what means, specifically, Andrews politicized writing has tried to introduce “dissensuality” into the extensive neo-liberal and dawning “post-political” consensus of the long 1980s. For Rancière, in other words, politics, as a process, consists in the blurring of the boundaries between what is considered political and what is not. In a similar vein, aesthetics as a paradoxical regime of the identification of art, while identifying art in the singular, at the same time effects the blurring of the boundaries between art and non-art. It is a regime of the identification of art in which, “the field of experience, severed from its traditional reference points”, is therefore open for new restructurings through the ‘free play’ that is aesthetic experience.<sup>65</sup> The logic underlying the practices of art and politics, argues Rancière, is a materialist and anti-essentialist one. For Rancière, in contradistinction to Schiller’s transcendental *homo ludens* as well as Susan Sontag’s notion of a “ludic postmodernism,” free aesthetic play is only ‘free’ insofar as it reveals the contingency of a given *partage du sensible* through a process of dissociation between what is perceivable and what is (framed) reasonable – “a rupture in the relationship between sense and sense, between what is seen and what is thought, and between what is thought and what is felt.”<sup>66</sup>

The difference between politics and aesthetics resides in the type of dissensual movements they create: the aesthetic movement of politics “consists above all in the framing of a *we*, a subject of collective demonstration whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts.”<sup>67</sup> The political character of aesthetics, by contrast, “does not give a collective voice to the anonymous. Instead, it re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience.”<sup>68</sup> In this way, however, “it aids to help create the fabric of a common experience [including what is common to language/speech] in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed.”<sup>69</sup>

What appeared in a negative way through Rancière’s investigation of consensus, and the proliferation of consensual policy making and practice in the 1980s and 1990s – accompanied

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<sup>64</sup> Rancière 2010a, 149.

<sup>65</sup> Corcoran 2010, 17f.

<sup>66</sup> Rancière 2010a, 143.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 141f

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 142.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

by a proliferation of discourses on the “end” of things, whether history, art, ideology, or politics itself<sup>70</sup> – was that politics is still an aesthetic affair, an aesthetic conflict, which is encapsulated in Rancière’s key concept *le partage du sensible* and has nothing to do with Benjamin’s notion of the fateful “aestheticization of politics” by the Fascists. It is in this sense that the role of aesthetics is crucial for politics. As noted by Arsenjuk, following Žižek:

It is one of the greatest achievements of Rancière’s to redirect the commonly accepted “Benjaminian” doxa of the inherently fascist character of aestheticization of politics towards an understanding of another, crucial aesthetic dimension of politics (and the political dimension of aesthetics), which, unlike the aestheticization of politics as a unification of the antagonistic social body into an organic whole, is understood precisely as the dimension of the split of the social body from itself, the disruption of the existing distribution of social parts and places, and the reorganization of the sensible world on which it rests.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the ability of art and aesthetic experience to render perceivable fractures in the police order and create dissensuality though, Rancière insists that there is no *a priori* causality between such perceptual dissociation and concrete forms of political dissensus. There is “no formula.” What is important, however, is “that the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics be raised at [...] the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization.”<sup>72</sup> From this perspective, it is possible to challenge teleological accounts of artistic modernity, or postmodernity, and vain debates over the autonomy or heteronomy of art, whether it should ‘succumb’ to politics or abstain from it, since it “only ever lends to projects of domination or emancipation what [it is] able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the invisible.”<sup>73</sup> While some theorists on the Left have criticized Rancière’s ideas on the basis that “perceptual dissociation,” “dissensuality,” and “circulation” align too neatly with the demands of neo-liberal global capital, Rancière in turn has vehemently

<sup>70</sup> In this context, Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992) is only the most prominent, and certainly most populist, example. Rancière further notes in a “comments and responses” forum in *Theory & Event* 6:4 (2003) that “even the return of politics or the return of ‘the political’ came to us strangely through re-actualization of such thinkers as Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt who were obviously used [...] to bestow a sense of great philosophical Greek tradition on American constitutionalism and eventually on values of the Reagan era.”

<sup>71</sup> Luka Arsenjuk, “On Jacques Rancière,” *Eurozine* (March 2007) 7. The article is available through [www.eurozine.com](http://www.eurozine.com); cf. also Slavoj Žižek’s “The Lesson of Rancière,” in: Rancière 2004, 76f.

<sup>72</sup> Rancière 2004, 18.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 19.

rejected such criticism, because it seems to be predicated on the “somewhat too easily accepted thesis that today everything is becoming liquid; that soon the only thing capitalism will produce is life experiences for narcissistic consumers; and that the state’s only function will be to usher in the great flood.”<sup>74</sup> It is this branch of Western Marxism and post-Situationist discourse that much of Rancière’s polemical critique is levelled against:

One has even read – in Zygmunt Bauman’s writings, for example – hallucinatory declarations that states now restrain themselves from any will to military expansion and control, and that while they may sometimes send “smart” missiles discreetly over populations, that is only to open the floodgates wide to new “fluid, global, and liquid” powers. Frankly, the people of the Middle East would be happy if that were true, and undocumented immigrants would be really happy if the police “obliged” them to cross borders en masse. [...] we live in a world of absolutely material things produced by forms of work that are closer to sweatshop labor than to high-tech virtuosity. In this world, the borders are as solid as the inequalities, and, until there’s proof to the contrary, the United States doesn’t envision tearing down its wall but adding a thousand miles to it. The truth is [...] that *the police order is always at once a system of circulation and a system of borders. And the practice of dissensus is always a practice that both crosses the boundaries and stops traffic* [my emphasis]. In this sense, there is a whole school of so-called critical thought and art that, despite its oppositional rhetoric, is entirely integrated within the space of consensus. I’m thinking of all those works that pretend to reveal to us the omnipotence of market flows, the reign of the spectacle, the pornography of power.<sup>75</sup>

To sum up, according to Rancière, “the police” define(s) the configuration of the sensible, the thinkable, and the possible through a systematic production and reproduction of the given (that would amount to a positivization of the entire social sphere) rather than through spectacular strategies of control and repression, which also means that “policing” is exerted through all sorts of channels in the social body as well as through the managerial organisms of the state and the market, as theorists such as Adorno, Marcuse, Lefebvre, Althusser, Foucault, Jameson, Butler, or Žižek, among others, have demonstrated at length. Rancière’s critical-theoretical focus, however, is not so much on “the police” and its mechanisms of “policing” – reification, repressive tolerance, interpellation, neoliberal governmentality, the workings of biopower, etc. Rather, his work primarily engages the conditions of possibility of politics, of the emergence of a political subject and its inherent aesthetic dimension. Here, aesthetics

<sup>74</sup> Rancière, in: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, “Art of the Possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation with Jacques Rancière.” *Artforum* 45:7 (New York: March 2007) 256-68.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

opens up a field of political possibilities for art to introduce dissensuality into a post-political neo-liberal order (consensus) and instigate a break with “the police.”

### I.3 Political Subjectivity & the Avant-Garde: Between Archi- & Metapolitics

In a short but densely argued essay on “Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity,” Rancière arrives at the following assertion: “The notion of the avant-garde defines the type of subject suitable to the modernist vision and appropriate, according to this vision, for connecting the aesthetic to the political.”<sup>76</sup> However, he insists that its success, as a model of and concept for thinking the aesthetico-political, “cannot simply be attributed to the convenient connection it proposes between the artistic idea of innovation and the idea of politically guided change.”<sup>77</sup> Rather, and this is most important with regard to the problem of political subjectivity in avant-garde aesthetic politics and practices, Rancière attributes its success to the more covert connection it establishes between two different notions of the avant-garde:

On the one hand, there is the topographical and military notion of the force that marches in the lead, that has a clear understanding of the movement, embodies its forces, determines the direction of historical evolution, and chooses subjective political orientations. In short, the idea that links political subjectivity to a certain form: the party, an advanced detachment that derives its ability to lead from its ability to read and interpret the signs of history. On the other hand, there is another idea of the avant-garde that, in accordance with Schiller’s model, is rooted in the aesthetic anticipation of the future.<sup>78</sup>

It is in the latter that Rancière locates the meaning of the avant-garde in the aesthetic regime of art, “not on the side of the advanced detachments of artistic innovation but on the side of the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come.” For Rancière, “[t]his is what the ‘aesthetic’ avant-garde brought to the ‘political’ avant-garde, or what it wanted to bring to it [...] by transforming politics into a total life programme.”<sup>79</sup> The history of the relations between political parties and aesthetic movements, revolutionary vanguards and politicized avant-garde art movements, writes Rancière, “is first of all the history of a confusion [...] between these two ideas of the avant-garde,” which are in fact

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two different ideas of political subjectivity: the *archi*-political idea of a party, that is to say the

<sup>76</sup> Rancière 2004, 29.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 29f.

idea of a form of political intelligence that sums up the essential conditions for change, and the *meta*-political idea of global political subjectivity: the idea of the potentiality inherent in the innovative sensible modes of experience that anticipate a community to come.<sup>80</sup>

All of which is to say that the very idea of a politicized avant-garde is divided between the strategic conception and the aesthetic conception of the avant-garde.

In his canonical *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), Peter Bürger describes the historical avant-garde, a notion which he restricts to pre-war European Dada, Surrealism, and Russian and Weimar Constructivism, as a failed historical project which cannot be repeated. Its “metapolitical” project, to use Rancière’s term, has been hijacked by a Leninist, and brutally crushed by a Stalinist, “archi-politics,” or better, “archi-policing.” Unlike modernism, the avant-garde attacked the autonomy status of art and sought to destroy the institution of art in order to sublate art into the praxis of life. The historical avant-garde’s unabashedly utopian metapolitics, as Bürger shows, was predicated on the belief that by sublating art into a new life “creativity would cease to be the eccentric prerogative of individuals, with society itself revealed as a work of art.”<sup>81</sup> In order to give to man the possession of that which he had formerly only ever had the appearance, Marx had conceived of a revolution that was no longer political but human – a revolution supposed to realize philosophy by sublating it into the praxis of life. What Marx proposed, according to Rancière, was “a new and enduring identification of aesthetic man: namely, productive man, the one who at the same time produces both the objects and the social relationships in which they are produced.”<sup>82</sup> This convergence of aesthetic and political practice has been famously summed up by Marx himself in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*.

The supersession of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes; but it is this emancipation because these senses and attributes have become human, subjectively as well as objectively. The eye has become a human eye, just as its object has become a social, human object, made by man for man. The senses have therefore become theoreticians in their immediate praxis. They relate to the thing for its own sake, but the thing itself is an objective human relation to itself and to man, and vice-versa. Need or enjoyment have therefore lost their egoist nature, and nature has lost its mere utility in the sense that its use has become human use.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Rancière 2004, 30.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places: Life and Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998) 301.

<sup>82</sup> Rancière 2009a, 32.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus, 1988) 107.

Marx's enduring identification of "aesthetic man," his desire to effectively realize, i.e. sublate into the praxis of everyday life the emancipatory promise of aesthetics, formed the basis, as Rancière cogently shows, on which a juncture emerged between the Marxist vanguard and the historical avant-garde in the 1920s. After this brief but decisive encounter had failed, however, the project of sublating the institution of art with the praxis of life only succeeded in a non-revolutionary form through the culture industry, advertising, design, and architecture – all of which configure, to use another of Rancière's terms, "the décor of life."<sup>84</sup> While theorists like Adorno, Jameson, or Žižek, have argued forcefully that late capitalism colonizes all areas of life and human experience, including the unconscious, Rancière's thinking here, which tends to bypass Freudo-Marxist and Lacanian-Marxist psychoanalytical concepts, is certainly less stark. It is also less stark because it rejects quasi-teleological models like that of Bürger, while following, like Bürger does, Adorno's verdict that the sublation of art into the praxis of life can only be destructive of art's capacity to critique and imagine different shapes for reality if the praxis of everyday life remains one of capitalist instrumentality. While acknowledging the unavoidable complicity of all art, avant-garde or otherwise, with late capitalist modes of production, reification, and commodification, Adorno rejects both the idea that in complicity with capitalism the autonomy status of art neutralizes whatever critical content [*Gehalt*] there is to be 'found' in the individual work and the idea that the historical avant-garde's failure to sublate art into the praxis of life necessarily condemns the entire project of the postwar avant-gardes from the start.<sup>85</sup>

Having rendered visible the effects of a false sublation of autonomy, the historical avant-garde helped redefine the aesthetic politics, or metapolitics, of the post-war avant-garde: to "save the heterogeneity of the sensible" by resorting to the idea of hermetic and thus allegedly 'resistant' form based on the idea of making conceivable new forms of subjectivity qua aesthetic autonomy à la Adorno. However, as Rancière cogently shows, it is crucial to understand that the politics of aesthetics "operates in the unresolved tension between two opposed forms of politics: that of transforming art into forms of collective life, and that of preserving from all forms of militant or commercial compromise the autonomy that makes it a promise of emancipation." This tension sheds light on the dialectical transformation of avant-garde aesthetic politics after 1945 and what Rancière terms "entropies of the avant-garde."

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<sup>84</sup> Rancière 2009a, 73.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. for instance Theodor W. Adorno, "Avant-Garde," *Introduction into the Sociology of Music*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1976) 178-196, and *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004) 21-59.



## I.4 Sublation or Entropy? Vicissitudes of Avant-Garde Aesthetic Politics

If the politics of aesthetics operates in the unresolved tension between transforming art into forms of collective life, one the one hand, and preserving from all forms of militant or commercial compromise the autonomy that makes it a promise of emancipation, on the other, avant-garde theory and practice, according to Rancière, usually pushes one of these scenarios to the extreme and thus risks to “entail [its] own entropy, [its] own end of art.”<sup>86</sup> This is because the politics of aesthetics – the specific partition/distribution of the sensible that it enables – “consists precisely of a shuttling between these poles, playing an autonomy against a heteronomy and a heteronomy against an autonomy, playing one linkage between art and non-art against another such linkage.”<sup>87</sup> The notion of the avant-garde “end of art” à la Rancière is thus not to be confused with the Hegelian teleological notion of the “end of art,” put forth by Hegel in his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*.<sup>88</sup> Rather, it is entailed by a specific “emplacement of art’s autonomy and heteronomy” which dissolves the constitutive tension of two opposed aesthetic politics. This, again, is possible because the aesthetic formula ties art to non-art from the start, which means that there is a certain undecidability in the politics of aesthetics, while there exists “a metapolitics of aesthetics which frames the possibilities of art.”<sup>89</sup>

Contrary to pre-war avant-garde theory and practice, Western Marxist theorists and art critics like Adorno and Greenberg have famously championed the relative autonomy of art and insisted on the need for a separation of art from the forms of aestheticization of common life, in particular, the aestheticized commodity form, and the products of the culture industry. For Adorno, as well as for Marcuse<sup>90</sup>, the work’s political potential is associated with its radical separation from the products of the culture industry and the administered world in

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<sup>86</sup> Rancière 2010a, 132.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* (London: Penguin, 1993) 46-61.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Herbert Marcuse in his late *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), esp. his declared intention “to contribute to Marxist aesthetics through questioning its predominant orthodoxy,” which he understands to be “the interpretation of the quality and truth of a work of art in terms of the totality of the prevailing relations of production. Specifically, this interpretation holds that the work of art represents the interests and world outlook of particular social classes in a more or less accurate manner.” Similar to Adorno’s, Marcuse’s critique of this orthodoxy is “grounded in Marxist theory inasmuch as it also views art in the context of the prevailing social relations, and ascribes to art a political function and a political potential. But in contrast to orthodox Marxist aesthetics I see the political potential of art in art itself, in the aesthetic form as such. Furthermore, I argue that by virtue of its aesthetic form, art is largely autonomous vis à vis the given social relations. In its autonomy art both protests these relations, and at the same time transcends them. Thereby art subverts the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience” (ix).

general. But this potential, for Adorno and Marcuse, does not reside simply in the artwork's 'social isolation' but rather in its internal contradiction – the Adornian "dissonance" which testifies to the non-reconciled world and nourishes the idea that things could be otherwise. Rancière's reading of these critics' "emplotments of autonomy and heteronomy," where art must, as it were, draw a new borderline which cannot be crossed in order to demarcate itself from 'aestheticized' life, points to the fact that the post-war avant-garde insistence on art's autonomy is, in fact, based on the identification of its autonomy with a "twofold heteronomy."<sup>91</sup>

[T]he autonomy of Schönberg's music, as conceptualized by Adorno, is a double heteronomy; in order to denounce the capitalist division of labour and the adornments of commodification, it has to take that division of labour yet further, to be still more technical, more 'inhuman' than the products of capitalist mass production. But this inhumanity, in turn, makes the stain of what has been repressed appear and disrupt the work's perfect technical arrangement. The 'autonomy' of the avant-garde artwork becomes the tension between two heteronomies, between the bonds that tie Ulysses to his mast and the song of the sirens against which he stops his ears.<sup>92</sup>

By this logic, avant-garde art, "in order that [it] stay faithful to the promise of the aesthetic scene [would have] to stress more and more the power of heteronomy that underpins its autonomy" – an "inner necessity" that leads to another kind of "entropy," according to Rancière, by making the task of autonomous avant-garde art akin to that of "giving witness to sheer heteronomy."<sup>93</sup> The paradigmatic formulation of this avant-garde entropy can be found in the aesthetic theory of Jean-François Lyotard.<sup>94</sup>

Similar on first sight to Adorno's aesthetic theory, Lyotard's assigns to the avant-garde the task of demarcating the perceptible boundary that sets artworks apart from products of commercial culture. But in Lyotard's reading of Kant's Third Critique and reinterpretation of Adorno's Marxist radicalization of Kant, the very sense of this demarcation is inverted. As Rancière puts it, "[w]hat the artist inscribes is no longer the promise-carrying contradiction [...] of labour and enjoyment. The artist inscribes the shock of the *aistheton*, attesting to the

<sup>91</sup> Rancière 2009a, 41; cf. also Rancière 2010a, 129f. The idea of a "twofold heteronomy" is crucial to Adorno's understanding of modern art in general and encapsulated in the famous phrase, "Moderne ist Kunst durch Mimesis ans Verhürtete und Entfremdete [...]." Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedeman (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970) 39.

<sup>92</sup> Rancière 2010a, 129f.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 130.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. especially Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" and "Newman: The Instant," *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 196-211; 240-49.

mind's alienation from the power of an irremediable alterity.”<sup>95</sup> In Lyotard’s aesthetic theory of “the postmodern sublime”, the work’s sensible heterogeneity no longer vouches for the promise of emancipation. On the contrary, it invalidates the very idea of radical emancipation by *testifying* to the mind’s irremediable dependency with regard to the Other inhabiting it. “The work’s enigma then,” which for Adorno inscribed the unreconciled social antagonism of labor and enjoyment, “becomes the pure testimony of the power of that Other.”<sup>96</sup>

Moreover, what Rancière is cogently showing in his research is that phenomena which are generally considered part of a postmodern rupture such as “the mixture and combination of art forms and media,” all sorts of hybridization, “actually fall within the possibilities inherent in the aesthetic regime of art.”<sup>97</sup> According to Rancière,

Postmodernism, in a sense, was simply the name under whose guise certain artists and thinkers realized what modernism had been: a desperate attempt to establish a ‘distinctive feature of art’ by linking it to a simple teleology of historical evolution and rupture.<sup>98</sup>

However, “while modernist faith had latched on to the idea of the ‘aesthetic education of man’ that Schiller had extracted from the Kantian analytic of the beautiful, the postmodern reversal had as its theoretical foundation Lyotard’s analysis of the Kantian sublime.”<sup>99</sup> The latter was reinterpreted by Lyotard – partly drawing on his notion of the *differend* – as the scene of a founding distance separating the idea from any sensible presentation.<sup>100</sup> According to Rancière, this explains how, notwithstanding the earlier “joyful, postmodern artistic license, its exaltation of the carnival of simulacra,” postmodernism eventually became “the grand threnody of the unrepresentable / intractable / irredeemable, denouncing the modern madness of the idea of a self-emancipation of mankind’s humanity and its inevitable and interminable culmination in the death camps.”<sup>101</sup> Rejecting “every theology of time” and problematicizing the popular notion of a postmodern ‘crisis of representation,’ Rancière holds that literature, photography, film, music, installation, performance, and video art are all able, in principle, to “rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects.” As such, they may open “new passages toward new forms of political subjectivization,” while none of them, as

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<sup>95</sup> Rancière 2009a, 42.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 42f.

<sup>97</sup> Rancière 2004, 52.

<sup>98</sup> Rancière 2004, 28.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Loytard 1989, 206ff.; 248f.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Rancière insists, “can avoid the aesthetic cut that separates the outcomes from the intentions and forbids any straight way toward an ‘other side’ of the words and the images.”<sup>102</sup>

But to impose on art the ethical task of giving witness to the unrepresentable, i.e. its identification with sheer heteronomy, is to ignore the constitutive tension at the heart of aesthetics, which frames the possibilities of art and sets in motion the dialectic of avant-garde aesthetic politics. Moreover, for Rancière, it leads to a smothering of both aesthetics and politics in ethics, which in his thinking is directly related to the notion of consensus and the post-political state of liberal democracy today.<sup>103</sup> What usually goes by the name of critical or politicized art, on the other hand, instead of pushing to the extreme would have to navigate between these poles, while adding to the aesthetic dimension of the work a readable political signification à la Brecht or Godard, to name the most frequently cited exemplars, or for that matter, Bruce Andrews. Significantly, Andrews’s work has prompted critics and scholars to apply to it the term “avant-garde poetry” as well as various modifications, most notably “politicized avant-garde” and “post-avant,” as if to indicate, though in a rather unspecific way, that his theoretical framework and artistic practice must be distinguished from both the historical avant-garde and what Rancière has shown to be “entropies” of certain postwar conceptualizations of the avant-garde. Andrews’s post-avant-garde praxis, in fact, avoids the aporias of the avant-garde, and like Brecht’s or Godard’s seeks to refunction art for political purposes without jeopardizing the emancipatory metapolitics of aesthetics. Furthermore, as will be shown in CHAPTER II, Andrews, unlike more conventional ‘political poets,’ uses and extends the avant-garde’s archive of counter-hegemonic artistic techniques, locating the politics of writing and performance primarily at the level of poetic form and method.

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<sup>102</sup> Rancière 2009b, 82.

<sup>103</sup> For a highly elaborate account of this argument cf. Rancière 2010a, 184-202.

## I.5 The Post-Avant Problem

In summary, we note that the historical avant-garde movements negate those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, individual production, and individual reception as distinct from the former. The avant-garde intends the abolition of autonomous art by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of life. This has not occurred, and presumably cannot occur, in bourgeois society [...]

– Peter Bürger<sup>104</sup>

Since the publication of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984; [1974]) a number of avant-garde scholars and theorists, especially those who 'inherited' most directly the Frankfurt School's conceptual framework and critical agenda – including, perhaps most famously, Terry Eagleton<sup>105</sup> – have noted that there exists a radical postmodernism which is obviously heir to the radical aesthetico-political project of the historical avant-garde, but that the various neo-avant-garde moments – however artistically intriguing – hardly amount to more than failed rehearsals of revolutionary avant-garde praxis. Both Andreas Huyssen's *After the Great Divide*<sup>106</sup> and, more specifically, Benjamin Buchloh's *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry*<sup>107</sup> have made the case that the neo-avant-garde is at its most successful if it makes the aporias which seem to condemn its project from the start the central subject of their artistic practice. By critically negotiating and mediating, aesthetically as well as socio-practically, the intertwined processes of commodification, reification, and institutionalization to which it is subjected, the neo-avant-garde – if no longer politically revolutionary – would thus continue the avant-garde's critique of bourgeois culture and the commodification of art (and eventually of aesthetic experience itself) through the culture industry – a terrain which Rancière's aesthetic theory evacuates for political reasons.

John Roberts has pointed out that the theorization of post-war neo-avant-gardes is inseparable from a) "the reception of the avant-garde's social and political defeat," and b) the fact that paradoxically, in the 1960s "at the point where the avant-garde was being reconstituted and rehistoricized as a political project across various artistic practices the

<sup>104</sup> Bürger 1984, 54.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. esp. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 370ff.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Huyssen, 1986.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Buchloh, 2000.

historical and conceptual framework of key works from the 1920s and 1930s were being made available for the first time.”<sup>108</sup> Thus a striking discrepancy or conflict is put in place: at the same time as the concept of the avant-garde “is being made available conceptually to a new generation” – most artists in the 1960s and 1970s had little working knowledge of Soviet and Weimar avant-garde practice – it was also “being abandoned as a viable model theoretically.”<sup>109</sup> For Roberts, the post-war neo-avant-gardes, therefore, “are not simply failed rehearsals of discredited older practices, but the affirmation of what is judged to be living and productive and available to further development.”<sup>110</sup> Following Roberts, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of the avant-garde, which Rancière’s theory readily abandons, is actually given work to do, rather than revisited as a ‘style,’ or bourgeois model of anti-tradition. This sense of the neo-avant-garde as “a product of critical and productive misrecognition,” which to Roberts is valuable, is absent from Bürger and similar accounts, “because the category of historical failure outweighs any redemptive model of practice, reinscription and interpretation.”<sup>111</sup>

Preeminent avant-garde scholars and critics like Hal Foster and Andrew Benjamin, on the other hand, have in fact proposed a theory of the avant-garde which is open enough to include such a model. In the case of Foster, this is primarily achieved through the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (as reinterpreted by Lacan and Derrida)<sup>112</sup>, while Benjamin advances a theory of the avant-garde from the point of view of a “philosophy of ontological difference” pace Heidegger, Derrida and Lyotard.<sup>113</sup> However, for Roberts, the “open-avant-garde” model which can be found in Foster and Benjamin is problematic insofar as it comes down “to a way of reconstituting the present and futures of art within the boundaries of a stable capitalist art institution,” where art’s emergence from heteronomy into difference is seen as “a kind of a differential handing down of the past from within artistic tradition.”<sup>114</sup> Accordingly, Foster can stress that contemporary neo-avant-gardes “enact” the postmodern continuity of the early avant-gardes,<sup>115</sup> just as Benjamin can describe the contemporary avant-garde in terms of a kind of interdependent pluralizing of inherited tendencies and forms.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Roberts 2007, n. pag.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Hal Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo Avant-Garde?” *October* 74 (Fall 1994): 5-32.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Foster, 1994, 16; Andrew Benjamin, *Art, Mimesis, and the Avant-Garde: Aspects of a Philosophy of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1991) 1-6; 131ff.

<sup>114</sup> Roberts 2007, n. pag.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Foster 1994, 20.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Benjamin 1991, 131ff.

For Roberts, however, the problem is that these models miss the fact that tradition (or anti-tradition) is not just a space open to undetermined reconstitution but a space where cultural and social division is mediated and struggled through and against: “the counter-hegemonic entry of the neo-avant-garde in the 1980s into the postmodern art institution, [...] may advance a formal continuity with the original avant-garde, but it also enacts in a significant sense a violation of those violations which are not amenable to aesthetic redemption or semiotic recoding: cultural and social division.”<sup>117</sup> In Foster’s and Benjamin’s theoretical accounts, as well as in Lyotard’s aesthetics, the space of the avant-garde is essentially de-classed, whereas Rancière’s aesthetic theory, basically in accord with Adorno’s, protests the conflation of art and aesthetics and highlights the problem of class and other social divisions, thus re-politicizing aesthetics and avant-garde studies.

More recently, the question if an avant-garde is viable under the conditions of postmodernism has been tackled by Louis Armand, who notes in his introduction to *Avant-Post: The Avant-Garde under “Post-” Conditions* that such a question immediately gives rise to others, “concerning the status of avant-gardes historical or conjectural, and concerning the various cognates of post-modernism and the numerous other post-s and isms that have populated critical discourse in literature and the arts during the latter half of the last century.”<sup>118</sup> Looking at ‘cutting-edge’ developments outside the domain of art, Armand contends that while today it might be possible to speak of avant-gardism with respect to advances in cognitive science, quantum computing, or bio-genetics, “this in itself may simply reflect that the history of avant-gardism has always in some way been bound up with the question of consciousness [most immediately, perhaps, by various attempts at disrupting and transforming language itself], its transformation and re-invention,” and that its proper domain of art and critical aesthetics has increasingly tended to encompass “the encyclopaedic ‘lifeworld of man’ and the prospect of what humanity might yet become by grasping its own-most possibility in what ‘it is’ and what ‘it has been.’”<sup>119</sup> Accordingly,

[t]his curious temporal conjunction of the “avant” and the “post,” mediated by the trope of experiment (or of experience), has a long historical genealogy that only in relatively recent times acquired the self-consciously aestheticised character that, in the twentieth century, became institutionalised as “the” avant-garde, and which is often said to have terminated in the discourse of post-modernism. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this account of the “end of the

<sup>117</sup> Roberts 2007, n. pag.

<sup>118</sup> Armand 2006, 1.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 2.

avant-garde” is once again under contention, as the viability of a continuation, renewal or reinvention of avant-gardism – in tandem with the end, exhaustion, death of postmodernism – is raised by artists, critics, thinkers generally, unsatisfied with the pre-millennial wisdom that everything is permitted, hence nothing is any longer possible.<sup>120</sup>

Welcoming the renewed interest in the trope of the avant-garde on the ground that it serves to address the situation, today, “of those outposts (*avant-postes*) that ensure a future for *critical* culture,” Armand nonetheless concedes that the avant-garde has only ever maintained a kind of parasitical existence on the margin of bourgeois culture which it sought to reshape in its own image.<sup>121</sup> Paraphrasing Marx, he puts the problem as follows: “the conventions and clichés of all the dead avant-gardes weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”<sup>122</sup> While remaining profoundly sceptical of the contemporary avant-garde’s socio-political resonance, Armand is critically aware of what is at stake (politically) in the discourse of the avant-garde’s historical significance and possible future when he raises the question, in conclusion, “whether the long-standing debate over ‘the avant-garde’ and its various manifestations is simply a contest over terminologies or whether it is tied-in to a broader aestheticisation of ideology and of ideological purchase upon critical “praxis” and upon the “real.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. ibid. 3ff.

<sup>122</sup> Armand 2006, 13. With reference to Bürger’s insight that “when Duchamp puts his signature on mass-produced, randomly chosen objects and sends them to art exhibits, this provocation of art presupposes a concept of what art is” – just as Tristan Tzara’s cut-ups presuppose an idea of what literature is – Armand adds that, indeed, neo- or post-avant-garde pieces like “Bruce Nauman’s ‘Fountain’ and John Ashbery’s ‘Europe’ presuppose an idea of *avant-garde* art and *avant-garde* literature” (13).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 16.

## I.6 Recent Contributions to Avant-Garde Studies: New Genealogies and Critical Concepts – *in lieu of politics?*

On the “value of the construct of the avant-garde” and the “need for new narratives” of its history, Hal Foster writes in his widely influential *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the Turn of the Century*:

By now the problems of the avant-garde are familiar: the ideology of progress, the presumption of originality, the elitist hermeticism, the historical exclusivity, the appropriation by the culture industry, and so on. Yet it remains a crucial coarticulation of artistic and political forms. And it is this coarticulation of the artistic and the political that a posthistorical account of the neo-avant-garde, as well as an eclectic notion of the postmodern, serve to undo. Thus the need for new genealogies of the avant-garde that complicate its past and support its future.<sup>124</sup>

Foster’s diagnosis of what has been problematic about the avant-garde’s self-conception and vanguard ideology is pertinent, as is the critique of a “posthistorical” and “eclectic [...] postmodern” approach that risks blurring crucial differences between reactionary – even fascistic (as in the case of Italian Futurism) – and progressive avant-garde moments such as Russian and Weimar constructivism, which did not entail, as is sometimes suggested, but were actually brutally crushed by totalitarian regimes. Foster aspires to “support” the avant-garde’s “future” through new critical genealogies because he understands it to be a crucial “coarticulation of the artistic and the political.” It thus may be considered problematic with regard to a theory of avant-garde artistic practices and their relation to “the political,” that Foster’s writing, in contradistinction to Rancière, does nowhere offer a theoretical specification, or concept, of politics and political subjectivity. Rather, politics and the political are collapsed with the social, to the effect that avant-garde artistic practices are political insofar as they critique contemporary society.

On the other hand, Foster accomplishes an important task by calling for and offering, in the course of his book, new genealogies of the avant-garde with a critical view towards the interrelated concerns of race, class, and gender. Similar to Buchloh’s dialectical approach to the “avant-garde after avant-gardism,”<sup>125</sup> Foster effectively complicates teleological models of

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<sup>124</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the Turn of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT, 1996) 5.

<sup>125</sup> The term is used by John Roberts in an article by the same name: “Avant-gardes after Avant-Gardism,” *Chtodelat* 17 (2007) <<http://www.chtodelat.org/>> (May 1, 2011).

the avant-garde, such as Bürger's, that reduce various neo-avant-garde moments (Abstract Expressionism, FLUXUS, Living Theatre, Black Arts Movement, Structural Film, Ethnopoetics, Noise Music, Language Poetry, etc.) to failed rehearsals of the historical avant-garde's project of sublating art in the practice of everyday life, without substantial discussion of such moment's and movement's particularities and political significance. According to Bürger's influential but increasingly contested theory, neo-avant-garde moments/movements *a priori* cannot amount to anything more than postmodern eclecticism, at best, and spectacles in the service of the culture industry, at worst. However, Bürger's must be considered one of the very few theoretically sophisticated attempts at identifying a unique characteristic of the historical avant-garde – the sublation of art's relative autonomy into praxis that would unleash everybody's creativity and turn society into a work of art – which effectively serves to distinguish it from other forms of modernist and experimental art. As far as contemporary avant-garde theory and practice is concerned, scholars have been reluctant to formulate operative criteria to distinguish avant-garde aesthetic politics and social practices from postmodernist and experimental forms of politicized art in general. If this is considered a default, the question arises what operative criteria are conceivable instead to fulfill this analytical task?

One attempt at performing this task is made by the former Fluxus artist and theorist Dick Higgins, who in his “Preamble” to *Horizons* asks: “why are avant-garde works of such critical importance historically?” He gives the following answer:

There are two basic reasons: (1) by definition, avant-garde work minimizes traditional models, and therefore there tends to be an active, dialectical interrelationship between the form which a work assumes and the *material* of which it consists. The *material* is not channeled into an existing mode, but, rather, uses whatever uniqueness there is in the material to determine itself. (2) This channeling process, minimizing previous models, uses the experience and moment of existence of its maker, the artist, and therefore reflects the newly unique thing about its moment in history—the up-to-now-this-wouldn’t-have-been possible.

Higgins's emphasis on the material of the work of art determining itself and thus defining itself as avant-garde, or modern, clearly echoes Clement Greenberg's (and to a certain extent Adorno's) modernist formula and is no less problematic in its teleological implications. Following Rancière, one might beg to differ: within the “aesthetic regime,” as opposed to the “representative regime,” new art is never simply contrasted with the old. What is contrasted, more profoundly, are two regimes of historicity: “It is within the representative regime that the old stands in contrast with the new. In the aesthetic regime of art, the future of art, its

seperation from the present of non-art, incessantly restages the past.”<sup>126</sup> Moreover, not only is the “up-to-now-this-wouldn’t-have-been possible” bound up with a teleological model of (not just art) history, but it is also irrelevant in terms of avant-garde aesthetic politics. It is rather the “up-to-now-this-hasn’t-been-visible”, readable, or audible, that is crucial to the way in which novel forms of art infringe on the partition/distribution of the sensible. Higgins’s point about the new composition of material according to the properties of that very material is well taken, but that does not necessarily minimize previous models, nor can it “reflect” the singular moment of history at which the work was produced in itself – something which is rather accomplished retrospectively through critical discourse and art history. Rather, it reflects all kinds of tensions, or dialectical relations, between the past and the present, and between different emplotments of art’s autonomy and heteronomy.

Respectively, Paul Mann’s *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*<sup>127</sup> and Barrett Watten’s *Constructivist Moment*,<sup>128</sup> in different ways, have tried to perform the task of differentiating avant-garde from modernist or postmodernist experimental art theoretically, without recourse to teleological models. Mann’s deconstructive approach to the discourse of the avant-garde arrives at the perplexing conclusion that “the discourse of the avant-garde death is its death and in death it continues to reproduce itself as a death-discourse,” which is Mann’s idiosyncratic (or better: Derridean) way of asserting that “the discourse of the avant-garde” is its point of origin, death, and afterlife, all at once.<sup>129</sup> Mann devotes much of his essay to making the point that both art’s and theory’s *raison d’être* is to generate further discourse, to keep the “discursive economy” going, however resistant to the dominant culture that art or theory may appear to be.<sup>130</sup> Watten, on the other hand, himself an avant-garde poet and protagonist of the Language school, advances a revisionist account of the avant-garde through the cultural materialist methodologies of Anglo-American cultural studies, paired with a radical formalism and sophisticated excursions into continental philosophy, to arrive at a theory of “avant-garde negativity.”<sup>131</sup> In one of the book’s most intriguing chapters, “Negative Examples: The Theory of Negativity in the Avant-Garde,” Watten writes:

If there is one criterion of the avant-garde with which its critics all agree, it is of the avant-garde’s historical origins in a negative moment of refusal of the culture from which it emerges. This

<sup>126</sup> Rancière 2004, 24f.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Mann 1991.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Watten 2003.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Mann 1991, 40.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Mann 1991, 31ff.

<sup>131</sup> Watten 2003, 238ff.

refusal may take the form of an explicitly oppositional politics; or it may be self-negating even to the point of withdrawal from society or suicide; or it may involve a radical reconfiguration of the formal possibilities of a genre or medium and their cultural significance. Arguably, all three are related – countercultural politics, self-negation, and new formal possibilities – and will be present to some degree in any instance of the avant-garde.<sup>132</sup>

Watten further emphasizes that it would be false to understand negativity as single instances of refusal or rupture as this tends to lead “directly into logics of absorption and recuperation within the received order of culture.” The concept of “antagonism,” on the other hand, particularly as it emerges from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s construction of discursive hegemony and Slavoj Žižek’s psychoanalytic critique of ideology, “has the advantage of being able to unite the three registers of the avant-garde into a single moment that encompasses the cultural, psychological, and formal aspects of innovation [...].”<sup>133</sup> With a pronounced dedication to critical theory as radical praxis, Watten urges not to “[restrict] the moment of avant-garde negativity [...] to an analytically isolated opposition, either permanent or transitory, to a cultural or aesthetic state of affairs.” Instead,

We need to find ways of positioning negativity that do not end in a predictable result: sterility or recuperation, a decline of force or a reintegration into the whole. As several critics who have thought through the place of negativity in the critical tradition have argued, there is no one-size-fits-all negativity that derives from either logical or determinate negation – it is limited neither to “this statement is either true or false” nor to “there exists something by virtue of that which it is not.”<sup>134</sup>

Correctly pointing out that negativity has “more than the single attribute of the logical operation of negation performed by the particle *not*,” Watten is presenting the reader with a comprehensive list of the notion’s possible meanings, as it will be specified by its particular construction or positioning within philosophical, psychological, or cultural systems of which it is a constitutive part: “negativity as the inaccessible substrate of nature [...]; a posited abstraction that codetermines the form of the concept [...]; a desire that cannot be integrated into positive forms of representation; [...] a moment of excess or nonintegration fundamental to the establishment of [...] identities; the construction of a limit of participation in a culture beyond which a given activity no longer is admissible; the political rupture of revolutionary

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 239.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 239f.

politics; and a form of behavior or acting out that is unacceptable.”<sup>135</sup> Observing that negativity is commonly associated with and integral to such concepts as “non-identity, antagonism, nihilism, revolt, defamiliarization, rupture, opposition, dissociation, conflict, delusion, void, emptiness,” Watten thinks of the avant-garde as “partaking of any or all of these modes – even as its final horizon, a denial of positivity, locates each instance as a potential form of critique.”<sup>136</sup>

In order to answer the question then, “what is negativity, as an element of literary and cultural production,” Watten spectacularly works through the varying notions of negativity in thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Freud, Lacan, Adorno, and Foucault, which he sees coming together in the writing of Slavoj Žižek, whom he credits with a “poetics of the Real.”<sup>137</sup> While it is certainly beyond the scope of this study to explicate Watten’s argument in detail here, it seems pertinent to at least discuss the book’s central idea: avant-garde works of art, or avant-garde cultural texts, whether films or poems, are those which evince a “negative” and thus “constructivist moment,” understood as “an elusive transition in the unfolding work of culture in which social negativity – the experience of rupture, an act of refusal – invokes a fantasmatic future – a horizon of possibility, an imagination of participation.”<sup>138</sup>

Notwithstanding pronounced methodological differences between their theoretical frameworks, Watten’s notion of a constructivist moment (of negativity) and Rancière’s notion of dissensus, understood as a re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible, seem to align neatly, as it were, in many ways. In Rancière’s thinking, however, dissensus is also constitutive of politics, since it is the precondition for acts of political subjectivization, setting capacities in motion rather than ‘pointing’ to a “horizon of possibility” by means of what is lacking in the present. Dissensual activity, in Rancière’s sense, is that which breaks with the “police order” of the “distribution” of parts, bodies, and capacities according to the “logic of the proper,” which in today’s post-political situation is represented by the neo-liberal consensus. The logic of the latter may best be characterized as proceeding by “continued accumulation through dispossession,” socio-economically, of course, by capital accumulation through dispossession of individual and common wealth (privatization, mortgaging, dismantling of the welfare state, etc.), but also politically, by effecting a shrinkage of political space. Because the problem of political subjectivity is hardly ever confronted as such in

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 240.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid. 254.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. 257.

avant-garde studies, however, it appears reasonable to entertain a dialogue with contemporary political theory.

Facing the post-political, post-democratic consensus of neo-liberal capitalism, Rancière accords theoretical primacy to politics as that which redefines what counts as ‘the political’ – a polemical struggle over “the common of the community” that reveals as political what before was plainly considered “social,” “economic,” or “domestic.” Explicitly poststructuralist-Marxist theorists like Hardt and Negri, on the other hand – to name only the most prominent example of a pluralized vanguard model of political subjectivity – have attempted to identify a new revolutionary subject (“the multitude”) or rather its “becoming,” according to the socio-economic logic of global capitalism itself, in meta-political fashion. For Rancière, such a conception of political subjectivity risks lapsing into a new kind of essentialism.

“Multitudes” is the name for this power of superabundant being identified with the essence of the community, one which, by virtue of its superabundance, is endowed with the burden of blowing apart all barriers and of accomplishing itself in the form of a perceptible community. Dismissing the negativity of political subjects means that the power of affirmation must become a power of disruption or, in other words, the ultimate content lodged inside every state of domination charged with overcoming all separation. The ‘multitudes’ must become the content of which the Empire is the container. [...] The essential thing is the metapolitical affirmation according to which the system is endowed with a truth that has its own effectivity. The manifest reticence with regard to the notion of “productive forces” attests simply to the gap between the ontological concept of production and its empirical avatars.<sup>139</sup>

Furthermore, where Hardt and Negri exult “nomadic movements” that, allegedly, “overflow and break the limits of measure” and create “new spaces,” described by “inhabitual topologies,” by “rhizomes” that are subterranean and impossible to contain, Rancière admonishes: “The nomadic movements invoked as evidence of the explosive power of the multitudes are in essence the movements of populations that have been forced to flee the violence of nation-states and the dire misery into which these failed states have dragged them.”<sup>140</sup> In Rancière’s view, the post-Operaistic concept of the multitude is “an endeavour to measure up to an effectively globalized world in which the people is still clinging to the nation-state.” This is ambition itself is “right so long as it does not forget that today –

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<sup>139</sup> Rancière 2010a, 87f.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 89.

globalization or otherwise – there are twice as many nation-states, twice as many military, police, etc., apparatuses, than there were 50 years ago.”<sup>141</sup> Since it is impossible to confront capital directly, on a global political stage – the only locatable targets here would be financial institutions, like the World Bank and the IMF, or events, like the G8 summits – the “national situation,”<sup>142</sup> to use Frederic Jameson’s term, while thoroughly effected by and effecting globalization in dialectical fashion, remains the crucial site of politics, which by no means precludes international solidarity.

[...] since it is continually thwarted, the power of the people must be re-enacted ceaselessly by political subjects that challenge the police distribution of parts, places, or competences, and that restage the anarchic foundation of the political. The structure of this disjunction is not aporetic but dissensual. If there is anything that is aporetic, it is the attempt to ground the political on its own principle. However, because the foundation is riven, democracy implies a practice of dissensus, one that it keeps re-opening and that the practice of ruling relentlessly plugs.<sup>143</sup>

Rancière’s theory thus avoids the aporetic nature, for instance, of Watten’s “avant-garde negativity,” which indeed troubles every politics of negativity, or ‘negative’ utopia. He has been described by Grabher as “dialectician of contingency” – a description which aptly fits his overall theoretical project. While much of Rancière’s thinking is indeed dialectical, in the Adornian sense of “consistent consciousness of nonidentity,” he refuses to introduce the concept of negativity into political theory – an operation which has been proposed, among others, by John Holloway.<sup>144</sup> If what Rancière refers to as “police” effects a constant circulation and policing of subjects and subjectivities, bodies and capacities – “the clear categorization of every individual, of every ‘visible’ social unit” – then disturbing such orders of the visible, the sensible, the perceptible, “and proposing different lateral links, unexpected short-circuits,” according to Žižek, “is the elementary form of resistance.”<sup>145</sup> As Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge state in their important critique of the influential Habermasian public sphere model in uncanny anticipation of Rancière and Žižek.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. esp. Frederic Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham: Duke UP, 2007b). “[...] it seems to me that a powerful sense of the unity of the national situation does not necessarily involve xenophobia or narrowness but can be a whole opening to both political praxis and very vigorous kinds of cultural expression [...]” (88).

<sup>143</sup> Rancière 2010a, 54.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. esp. John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power* (London: Pluto, 2002) and Holloway, et al. 2009, 3-12.

<sup>145</sup> Žižek 2004, 77.

The real experiences of human beings, produced in everyday life and work, *cut across such divisions* [my emphasis] ... the weakness characteristic of virtually all forms of the bourgeois public sphere derives from this contradiction: namely, that [it] excludes substantial life interests and nevertheless claims to represent society as a whole.<sup>146</sup>

One possible way of defining contemporary politicized avant-garde praxis would thus be to identify it with a concentrated politico-aesthetic effort to “cut across such divisions” by making the divisions themselves perceivable, aesthetically, through new forms of artistic practice.

In a very recent attempt at restoring to avant-garde studies a political perspective, Mike Sell has suggested to re-conceptualize the process of avant-garde praxis in terms of “vectors of the radical.”

A “vector of the radical” is a kind of thing, a thing that moves and interacts with the people and places it encounters. Wherever they move, such things catalyze change, radical change. This is the kind of change that goes to the root of a society (“roots” being the etymological origin of the term “radical”). Wherever vectors of the radical travel, change happens that alters basic ideologies, social relations, attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviour, or cultural practices.<sup>147</sup>

Here, one cannot but notice the passage’s obvious similarity with the rhetoric of marketing claims and product advertisement – of the way, for instance, in which lifestyle gadgets like Apple’s iPod or iPhone are said to “revolutionize your life” – or, for that matter, that paradigmatic avant-garde genre: the manifesto. All of this hardly could have escaped Sell’s notice. Apart from such stylistic considerations, however, the notion suggests that there may not have been too many “vectors of the *radical* [my emphasis]” moving and interacting with people and places since May 68 and its aftermath, unless one grants war, genocide, and terrorism such status. Fortunately, on the progressive side of it, at the time of writing this thesis, the ongoing democratic revolutions in Egypt, Libya, and other parts of Northern Africa and the Middle East. Admittedly, Sell himself explicates the notion further, attempting to do justice to the multidimensionality of the “vector” metaphor.

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<sup>146</sup> Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) 33.

<sup>147</sup> Sell, et al. 2011, 1.

Complicating our understanding of how vectors of the radical shape modernity is the fact that they are both a form of praxis and a medium for praxis. [...] Further complicating matters, vectors of the radical occasionally alter the very conditions of exchange that enabled them to be there in the first place. [...] A vector of the radical need not only be a thing, however; a person can be a vector too. [...] The body, as with all vectors of the radical, is both a form of praxis and a medium for praxis. [...] Language is also important.<sup>148</sup>

The problem with Sell's notion of "vectors of the radical," at least from the point of view of a study which endeavours to map out and reflect upon the complex relationships between critical theory, avant-garde aesthetic politics and praxis, and political subjectivity, closely resembles a problematic which 'bedevils' cultural studies' recent turn to affect theory as well: in both cases the conceptual metaphors guiding and structuring the respective field of study leave no room for (theoretical reflection on) the process of political subjectivization. In case of the former, every material body, or process, is either endowed with, or implicated by a ("vector" of) rather diffuse radicality – implicitly suggesting that "radical" may better be understood as rhizomatic, since otherwise one would need to explicate, or at least signify, what one considers to be at the 'roots' of "social relations, attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviour, or cultural practices."<sup>149</sup> In the case of affect theory, where a Spinozian/Deleuzian non-dialectical materialism, with its emphasis on "immediacy" and "health," and the Foucauldian notion of "biopower," are readily acknowledged to be of central importance, subjective agency, political or otherwise, tends to disappears from view. Political subjectivization is at best reduced to the subject's affective capacity and situatedness in what Raymond Williams – carefully demarcating the concept from the diffuse Herderian *Zeitgeist* – calls "structures of feeling,"<sup>150</sup> or, at worst, directly cancelled out by the wholesale dispersion of the subject into a multiplicity of affects and percepts amounting to its identification with some "Being that wills nothing," even as it desires everything.<sup>151</sup> Thus, while these approaches rightfully attempt to adequately account for the perplexing complexity of their field of study, and reverse the long-standing (Cartesian) theoretical disregard for the somatic and neglect of human affects and emotions, they risk loosing, in contradistinction to Williams or Rancière, both their explanatory power and critical edge.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 1f.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>150</sup> Cf. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 128-35.

<sup>151</sup> Rancière 2010a, 90.

Besides such considerations, Sell et al. cogently advance a notion of the avant-garde as a transnational, performance-based culture built upon diverse forms of material exchange. Significantly, these critics conceive performance in highly varied ways – as “a formal, historical, political, aesthetic, sociocultural, textual, and theoretical form of human expression” – in an attempt to provide a richly textured sense of what performance is and what it can achieve. As the metaphor of “vectors” suggests, Sell and others who base themselves in a cultural materialist theory and practice of performance studies, dedicate themselves to “mapping the movement of scripts, theatre activists, performances, and other material entities around the world” in order to confirm that “the avant-garde was and is a significant presence in our world.”<sup>152</sup> Similarly, James Harding and John Rouse emphasize the fact that canonical studies of the avant-garde have generally neglected the centrality of the concept of “performance” and its “transnational foundations,” arguing that the notion is “fundamental to the very definition of the avant-garde,” thus making a case for the significance of theatre departments and performance studies as “a point of departure for a radical redefinition of the avant-garde *across the disciplines.*”<sup>153</sup>

The important contribution of Sell (2005; 2011), Harding and Rouse (2006), and others, consists in ‘heeding’ Foster’s call, as it were, for “new genealogies of the avant-garde.” Besides a genuinely transnational understanding of avant-garde performance, these scholars have carried out a post-colonial critique of canonical Euro-centrist histories and theories of both the historical and various post-war avant-gardes, providing new critical genealogies of avant-garde cross-cultural exchange, both discursive and material. Aspects of cultural hybridity and cultural flow, the cross-cultural re-negotiation and transformation of cultural traditions and artistic practices, have been studied extensively by sophisticated scholars from a wide array of disciplines and are studied in great detail by Sell, Harding and Rouse, and others, with respect to avant-garde theory. What these approaches usually fail to address, however, is the process of political subjectivization on the part of those involved in social movements. The liberal recuperation, particularly since the 1990s, of political struggles under the sign of “identity,” “pluralism,” “recognition,” and more recently, “tolerance,” tends to contort the fact that the Civil Rights movement and its aesthetico-political vanguard, for instance, to use only the most luminous example, were involved in a radical emancipatory politics – “the polemical verification of equality” that is “democratic dissensus.”<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Sell 2011, back cover.

<sup>153</sup> Sell 2011, 209. For an earlier study which emphasizes the significance of performance to avant-garde practice, and thus an exception to the rule, cf. Sayre, 1989.

<sup>154</sup> Steven Corcoran in: Jacques Rancière 2010a, 14.

In contradistinction to American-style minority or identity politics, political subjectivization for Rancière necessarily involves a transformation of identities. The process must be initiated by some form of desubjectification – an original break with the existing partitioning, distributing, and policing of subject positions giving way to a process of individuation and, eventually, political subjectivization proper as the deliberate association of political subjects in the polemical verification of equality. Political subjectivities, in other words, are only contingently related to existing social identities. The question thus arises how post-avant-garde forms of radical cultural praxis, if they are to be political, may contribute to a re-opening of political space and provide experiences which may facilitate the process of political subjectivization. This recalls the guiding question of thesis: in what ways the non-identitarian politics of Andrews's work can be said to help introduce “dissensuality” into the emerging/prevailing neoliberal and post-political consensus – from post-Vietnam to post-9/11 ‘times’ – by means of a politicized, and politicizing, writing and performance practice aimed at facilitating new forms of “dissensual commonsense.”<sup>155</sup> The following chapter thus engages Rancière’s theoretical account of the basic problems of politicized art.

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<sup>155</sup> Rancière 2010a, 139f.

## I.7 Problems and Possibilities of Politicized: Adjusting Heterogenous Logics

“In its most general expression,” writes Rancière, politicized art is “a type of art that sets out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination” with the intention to turn its spectator, reader, or listener into “a conscious agent of world transformation.”<sup>156</sup> The general problem with this cause and effect model is, of course, the fact that artworks, texts, or performances cannot determine the process of their reception by (readerly) subjects. Going beyond this truism, Rancière’s analysis locates the problem at two levels: on the one hand,

understanding does not, in and of itself, help transform intellectual attitudes and situations. The exploited rarely require an explanation of the laws of exploitation. The dominated do not remain in subordination because they misunderstand the existing state of affairs but because they lack confidence in their capacity to transform it. Now, the feeling of such a capacity presupposes that the dominated are already committed to a political process in a bid to change the configuration of sensory givens and to construct forms of a world to come, from within the existent world.<sup>157</sup>

On the other hand,

The work which builds understanding and dissolves appearances kills, by doing so, the strangeness of the resistant appearance that attests to the non-necessary or intolerable character of a world. Insofar as it asks [recipients] to discover the signs of Capital behind everyday objects and behaviours, critical art risks being inscribed in the perpetuity of a world in which the transformation of things into signs is redoubled by the very excess of interpretative signs which brings things to lose their capacity of resistance.<sup>158</sup>

I shall defer my own critique of this analysis here in order to further explicate Rancière’s argument first. Rather than considering this problematic as proof that aesthetics and politics cannot go together, Rancière argues that “[i]t would be more valid to see in it the plurality of ways in which they are linked.” Confronting the constitutive tension between two opposed

<sup>156</sup> Rancière 2009a, 45. Rancière alternately uses the terms “critical art” and “political art.” In order to avoid terminological confusion I use the term “politicized art” (writing, performance, etc.) to signify that art which strategically adjusts heterogenous logics in order to solicit modes of reception which allow for aesthetic experience and critical reflection to converge most effectively, as it were. In this context, the adjective “politicized” also implies certain degree of authorial as well as readerly agency and aesthetic labor.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 45f.

types of politics at the heart of the aesthetic regime of art, politicized art – in order to avoid the aporias, or “entropies of the avant-garde,” i.e. those emplotments of autonomy and heteronomy that entail the self-cancelation of art – would have to negotiate “between the tension which pushes art towards ‘life’ as well as that which, conversely, sets aesthetic sensoriality apart from the other forms of sensory experience.”<sup>159</sup> More specifically, in order to avoid both blatant didacticism and archi-ethical forms of policing, it would have to “borrow the *connections* [my emphasis] that foster political intelligibility from the zones of indistinction” between art and non-art, while simultaneously “from the solitude of the work it has to borrow the sense of a sensible heterogeneity which feeds political energies of refusal.”<sup>160</sup>

In combining, or adjusting, these heterogeneous logics, collage – including various media-specific types of montage, and in the case of modernist poetics, radical parataxis – has become one of modern art’s major techniques since its technical forms obey a genuinely aesthetico-political logic: “[...] the politics of collage has a balancing-point in that it can combine the two relations and play on the line of indiscernability between the force of sense’s legibility and the force of non-sense’s strangeness.”<sup>161</sup> With regard to Andrews’s writing practice, the aesthetico-political force of his texts, on a very general level, can be said to reside in their capacity to radically aestheticize, or re-aestheticize, the English language and polemically juxtapose contents from radically different domains without the writing becoming too hermetic, or opaque, to incorporate any readable political signification and play on the line of that indiscernability.

What might be said to be most important with regard to the aesthetic politics of politicized poetry is literary writing’s capacity to blur the dividing lines between different modes of perception, different modes of apprehension, and different modes of thought, or rationalities, that are generally thought to be incompatible and rigidly assigned to their proper (sociological) fields. If one thinks of aesthetics not as a philosophical discourse, or discipline, but as a specific “partition/distribution of the sensible” and thus a kind of ‘discourse matrix,’ as Rancière’s work suggests, then art in the aesthetic regime, including poetry and performance, becomes a kind of discourse blender in which literally everything can mix. Politicized art, at least since the historical avant-garde, has exploited this logic most effectively through means of collage in the most general sense of a polemical encounter

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<sup>159</sup> Rancière 2009a, 46.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. 46f.

between heterogeneous elements, whether in Dadaist texts, “[t]he Surrealist’s encounter between the umbrella and the sewing-machine,” the photomontages of John Heartfield, Brechtian *Verfremdung*, or Fluxus events.

From Dadaism through to the diverse kinds of 1960s contestatory art, the politics of mixing heterogeneous elements had one dominant form: the polemical. Here, the play of exchanges between art and non-art served to generate clashes between heterogeneous elements and dialectical oppositions between form and content, which themselves served to denounce social relations and the place reserved for art within them. [...] The collage of heterogenous elements generally took the form of a shock, revealing one world hidden beneath another: capitalist violence beneath the happiness of consumption; and commercial interests and violence of class struggle beneath the serene appearances of art.<sup>162</sup>

It can be said that an “aesthetic politics,” for Rancière, defines itself by “a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms,” and he employs the notion of “heterology” to refer to the ways in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible might be disturbed by art and politics.<sup>163</sup> However, despite the ability of art and aesthetic experience to render perceivable fractures in the police order and create dissensuality, Rancière insists that there is no *a priori* causality between such perceptual dissociation and concrete forms of political dissensus. If the avant-gardistic self-critique of art in bourgeois society in that way became involved in the critique of mechanisms of state and market domination, its polemical procedure inherits the same problem which troubles (political) allegory. Whoever already possesses the semiotic ‘key’ to the allegorical account has therefore access to its political dimension, while she who lacks it would remain unaware of the work’s “readable political signification.” What alleviates this paradox of political allegory, at least to some degree, is the idea that politicized art may work as a kind of reinforcement of already existing political desires and more fragile beliefs. While Rancière problematizes the cause-and-effect models of even the most sophisticated strategies of politicizing art such as Brecht’s Epic Theatre,<sup>164</sup> the idea that politicized art may foster dialogue, critical discourse, new social forms of collaboration and political forms of collective enunciation should not be easily dismissed.

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<sup>162</sup> Rancière 2009a, 51.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Rancière 2004, 63f.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. Rancière 2004, 62ff.; Rancière 2009a, 47ff.; Rancière 2009b, 4ff.

Given that a theoretical discourse, as Rancière emphasizes, “is always simultaneously an aesthetic form, a sensible reconfiguration of the facts it is arguing about,” that it has “a poetic nature and thus breaks down borders and hierarchies between discourse,” the challenge of politicized art may also be conceived in terms of a poetics of affect and dialectical shock. Following the ideas recently put forth by the work of Beverly Best, this study suggests that politicized art attempts to integrate the “production of affect” with a “dialectical shock of recognition” that would produce—through an epistemological and affective operation—an “ontological shift in the reader” to entail radical social effects.<sup>165</sup> Best finds such a strategy employed by Marx in the poetic technique of *Capital*. Instead of succumbing in a naïve way to the popular notion of a “micropolitics of affect” which ties art to politics and vice versa, as it were, without subjective mediation – thus suggesting that not only state and market based forms of biopower but also art and other forms of cultural practice ‘rewire’ the subject in an immediate way – Best acknowledges the importance of the emotional and somatic dimension of our lives without accepting the tenets of Deleuzian non-dialectical materialism, or vitalism, as popularized by Brian Massumi and others.

While in no way solving the problems pinpointed by Rancière, Best’s theoretical model provides a further methodological anchoring point for this study as it explores the radical aesthetico-political practice of Andrews as it aims to capacitate readers/listeners by transforming their *relation* to affect. It will be shown that Andrews has tried to conceive of ways to move beyond political art’s aporias, or what Rancière calls “the paradoxes of political art”, by positing and conceiving of “readerly *affect* as what activates the political stakes for poetry, its so-called ‘activism of the soul’; its ‘interrogation’ of markers of nation-state, class, ethnicity, gender; its foregrounding or privileging or deployment of ‘radical particularity’; its claims to be fashioning a new public or counter-public sphere.”<sup>166</sup> While the affective experience is at least partly a result of the innate mechanism of our bodies, it is certainly, as

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<sup>165</sup> Best 2011, 81f. Instead of rejecting the concept of mediation on the ground that biopower – as Hardt and Negri, following Deleuze and Foucault, have argued persistently over the last decade – works directly on the subject in an immediate way through a micropolitics of affect, Best convincingly argues that “the relationship between affect and mediation, in this case, could alternatively be described as a dialectical relationship. [...] affect and mediation can be understood as two different but interrelated effects of a single historical process. Such a perceptual shift reintroduces the categories of both the dialectic and mediation as useful analytical approaches to the present historical object. I will demonstrate that both analytical operations can be understood as compatible with, even as enhancing, the post-interpretive approach. In some cases, one could frame the matter differently. As a kind of ‘return of the repressed,’ these operations are not in fact absent from certain post-interpretive analyses so much as they travel incognito, under new names, often claiming alternative theoretical ancestry, all the while announcing remarkably similar or compatible lines of flight” (61f.).

<sup>166</sup> Andrews 2010b.

Donald Nathanson following Sylvan Tomkins reminds the reader, a result of the “highly complex matrix of nested and interacting ideo-affective formations.”<sup>167</sup>

It is this complex matrix of experience – a notion which obviously resonates with Rancière’s *le partage du sensible* – that Andrews’s work tries to render visible, audible, or perceivable by testing and contesting its limits to create an aesthetic space of political potentiality. If art in the aesthetic regime “re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience,” as Rancière emphasizes, then “a body’s capacity to affect and to be affected”<sup>168</sup> by definition plays a crucial role in that process. Moreover, it activates the political stakes for avant-garde aesthetic politics and practice and makes the readerly subject as *body-subject* – in its discursive and material formation – the site of contestation.

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<sup>167</sup> Donald L. Nathanson, “From Empathy to Community,” *The Annual of Psychoanalysis* (Vol. 25, 1997) 125-143. 131.

<sup>168</sup> Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 6.

## I.8 Rancière and Western Marxism: Implications for Avant-Garde Studies

It is not only political history which those who ignore are condemned to repeat. A host of recent ‘post-Marxisms’ document the truth of the assertion that attempts to ‘go beyond’ Marxism typically end by reinventing older Marxist positions [...] Even within Marxism itself, the terms of the problems, if not their solutions, are numbered in advance, and the older controversies [...] rise up to haunt those who thought we could now go on to something else and leave the past behind. Nowhere has this ‘return of the repressed’ been more dramatic than in the aesthetic conflict between realism and Modernism, whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today, even though we may feel that each position is in some sense right and yet that neither is any longer wholly acceptable.

— Frederic Jameson<sup>169</sup>

Studying the poetry and performance art of the US-American post-war and present day avant-gardes, one is inevitably confronted with the internal dialectics of avant-garde aesthetic practice and critical theory. There seems to be a contemporary recasting of the famous “Brecht-Lukács,” or “Realism-Modernism,” debate on politics and aesthetics and a resurgence of aesthetico-political concerns among contemporary theorists and artists.<sup>170</sup> Although the coordinates of this conflict have certainly been altered by several theoretical paradigm shifts since the 1930s, in particular the cultural, linguistic, and postcolonial turns – as will become obvious in the succeeding chapters on recent avant-garde theory and the work of Andrews – it still hinges on the question of political subjectivity, and more general, the notion of the subject. Jameson’s reference to “various ‘post-Marxisms,’” in the above citation, obviously does not include Rancière’s – Jameson’s text dates back to 1977. However, there is good reason to believe that Rancière’s theory would escape most of the charges which Jameson makes against French post-Marxism, such as, for instance, the tendency towards a wholesale ‘dissolution’ of the subject, or “the assimilation of realism as a value to the old philosophical concept of mimesis by such writers as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard or Deleuze [which] has reformulated the Realism/Modernism debate in terms of a Platonic attack on the ideological

<sup>169</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Reflections in Conclusion,” *Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 2007a [1977]) 196.

<sup>170</sup> In the context of US-American poetry and poetics it is the Language Poets and their successors as well as various post-colonial and gender-based movements who have contributed most effectively to such a resurgence of aesthetico-political concerns.

effects of representation”<sup>171</sup> – a central object of Rancière’s critique which somewhat unexpectedly aligns him with Jameson.

In this new (and old) philosophical polemic, the stakes of the original discussion find themselves unexpectedly elevated, and their issues – once largely political in focus – lent metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical) implications.<sup>172</sup>

In addition to the fact that the so-called “Realism/Modernism” debate, despite its continued relevance and the brilliance of its protagonists, involved a number of critical incongruities – in exile before the war, Bloch and Lukács polemicized against each other over the nature of expressionism, Brecht attacked Lukács for literary formalism (regarding realism and the novel) making the case for a social modernism (epitomized by the dialectical theatre), Benjamin disputed over classical and modern works of art and the emancipatory potential of mass media with Brecht, Adorno criticized Benjamin’s hermeneutics and (after the war) challenged Brecht’s poetics and Lukács politics – Rancière essentially exposes the simple opposition between literary Realism and Modernism as a false dichotomy. It not only fails to provide a non-reductive account of the complex relationship between aesthetics and politics but straightforwardly ignores the fact that Realism – no less than early Romantic poetry’s experiments with parataxis – is in fact hardly the opposite of modern art’s abstraction and non-representation, but rather its beginning.<sup>173</sup>

Engaging the question of the relationship between art, aesthetics, and politics, Rancière’s work forcefully reminds us that “art” and “politics” are contingent notions. By evoking the fact that “art in the singular” has only existed for two centuries and that this existence in the singular meant the upheaval of the coordinates through which the ‘fine arts’ had been located up to then as well as the disruption of the norms of fabrication and assessment that these coordinates presupposed, he suggests that “if the properties of each one of these regimes of identification was studied, it was possible to dissipate quite a lot of the haze surrounding the idea of a ‘modern project’ of art and its completion or failure.”<sup>174</sup> The same holds true, as will be argued in the course of this study, for the purported death of the avant-garde, i.e. the impossibility of avant-garde, or post-avant-garde, praxis in a postmodern context. Rancière, like Adorno, tends to privilege modernist forms over realist forms of art. But unlike Adorno,

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<sup>171</sup> Jameson 2007a, 199.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Cf. esp. Rancière 2010a, 152-68.

<sup>174</sup> Rancière 2004, 52.

he does not privilege them on the basis of a non-propositional truth-content, but because they can establish a kind of aesthetico-political “grid” – as he calls it in a discussion of Émile Zola and Virginia Woolf – that make(s) it possible “to think through forms of political dissensuality more effectively than the ‘social epic’s’ various forms.”<sup>175</sup> The following paragraphs will expound in some more detail what differentiates Rancière’s theoretical framework from the tradition of European “Cultural Marxism”<sup>176</sup> more general.

Western Marxists from Benjamin through Adorno to Debord and Baudrillard have considered modern capitalism’s, as it were, ‘superficially aestheticized’ commodity culture a threat to the autonomy of ‘genuinely’ aesthetic experience. More specifically, they critique “reification” (Lukács), “the culture industry” (Horkheimer and Adorno), “the society of the spectacle” (Debord), or “postmodern hyperreality” (Baudrillard), for their respective short-circuiting of aesthetic experience and consumerist desire, the threatening conflation of experience and ideology – in other words, the loss of ‘free appearances.’ Rancière suggests that this discourse of *Kulturkritik*, with its roots in the Feuerbachian critique of religion as a critique of distance, passivity, and alienation, risks perpetuating inequalities by positing a form of master-knowledge which alone will enable people to decipher the secrets of the commodity form and critique, or deconstruct, the ideologically functional discourses of the bourgeois-capitalist order in the ‘proper’ Freudo-Marxist or neostructuralist-Marxist key. Subjects as well as social movements which stray from these truths are thus condemned to a “social context of blindness” (Horkheimer/Adorno), which is to say, the misrecognition of their position within the totality of capitalist social relations – “*méconnaissance*”<sup>177</sup> (Lacan/Althusser).

The rejection of such a tendency towards orthodoxy is what motivates Rancière’s ferocious critical examination of its most dogmatic example – “Althusserian structuralist Marxism with its rigid distinction between scientific theory and ideology and its distrust towards any form of spontaneous popular movement which was immediately decried as a form of bourgeois humanism.”<sup>178</sup> Rancière’s theoretical intervention into this schema is not grounded in a rejection of Marxist analytical tools as such but in a rejection of a particular

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>176</sup> It seems mandatory to note here that this generic term unfortunately has been employed and popularized, ever since the Culture Wars of the early 1990s, by neo-conservative groups in the United States to discredit and brandmark (often in outright anti-Semitic terms) the ideas of Gramsci, Benjamin, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and other ‘secular progressives,’ charging them with indoctrination of US-American students and youth. Perhaps, this indicates the lasting socio-political influence of these thinkers and should thus be read as a positive sign.

<sup>177</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” *Lenin and Philosophy, and other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971) 127-186, 172.

<sup>178</sup> Žižek 2004, 69.

discursive employment of cultural and structuralist Marxism as a kind of master knowledge, which according to Rancière, not only runs counter to the idea of worker's intellectual emancipation but performatively re-inscribes, or re-installs, and thus reproduces the very hierarchies it seeks to abolish – the dividing lines between workers and bourgeois-intellectuals, manual and intellectual labour, unrefined senses and refined senses, incapacity for critical reflection and capacity for critical reflection.<sup>179</sup> This type of criticism of performative reinscription is characteristic of Rancière's approach to a number of highly influential critical sociologies, chief among which are the work of Althusser, Bourdieu, Baudrillard, and more recently, Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis of network-based organization, employee autonomy and post-Fordist horizontal work structures in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, which he denounces as “a kind of intellectual counter-revolution.”<sup>180</sup> As Rancière argues, in a scathing response to Bordieu's *Distinction*, the sociologist-interviewer announces the results in advance and finds out what his questions already presuppose: that things are in their place. Rancière points out that in Bordieu, the status quo is preserved by never confronting “the aesthetic thing” directly; the gray area of aisthesis is excluded:

Questions about music without music, fictitious questions of aesthetics about photographs when they are not perceived as aesthetic, all these produce inevitably what is required by the sociologist: the suppression of intermediaries, of points of meeting and exchange between the people of reproduction and the elite of distinction.<sup>181</sup>

While Rancière's anti-sociological bias and extraordinary faith in the performativity, or performative ‘side-effects,’ of sociologically oriented critical theory cannot but be considered problematic, his criticism concerning the very lack of a political conception of emancipation in the work of these thinkers is compelling. Unlike the polemical-theoretical broadsides against Althusser and Bourdieu, his criticism of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*<sup>182</sup> – the “brilliance” of which, however, “seems to have faded twice over” – is

<sup>179</sup> Cf. Rancière 1974; Rancière 1983; Rancière 1987. Rancière's critique of sociological mastery and the question of ‘performativity’ in relation to Judith Butler's use of the term is cogently discussed in Caroline Pelletier's article “Emancipation, Equality and Education: Rancière's Critique of Bourdieu and the Question of Performativity.” *Discourse* 30:2 (2009) 137-150. For a comprehensive critical explication of Rancière's basic argument s. Oliver Davis, *On Jacques Rancière* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010) 15-25.

<sup>180</sup> Cf. Jacques Rancière, “The Importance of Critical Theory for Social Movements,” public lecture (October 23, 2009) available through <http://www.continentalphilosophy.org/2011/02/16/> audio-jacques-Rancière-the-importance-of-critical-theory-for-social-movements-today.

<sup>181</sup> Jacques Ranciere, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003) 188f.

<sup>182</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. F.N. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007).

more nuanced, and deserves critical attention for its dialectical operation, which is particularly important, as I hope to show in what follows, with regard to avant-garde aesthetic politics and the internal dialectic of critical theory and avant-gardes praxis.<sup>183</sup> Rancière’s “Dialectic in the Dialectic”<sup>184</sup> begins by asking “How, today, are we to come to grips with Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialectik [sic] der Aufklärung?*” and sets out to explain why “its brilliance seems to have faded *twice* over [my emphasis]:”

[...] a first time, like that of a star of the constellation irremediably distanced in the past called Marxism; a second time, on the contrary, as the prototype, hackneyed by its copies, of the double discourse that is part of the banalized regime in which we live: the critique of the totalitarianism of Enlightenment reason that provides the liberal governmental order with its intellectual crowning point; and the critique of the culture industry that fuels the vaguely contestatory desires of intellectual opinion.<sup>185</sup>

In a conscious attempt to recover its radical heritage from a discourse of “hackneyers,” Rancière begins by acknowledging that, in one respect, in fact,

the book seems to be part of the oft-attempted history of tearing Marxism, as a thinking of emancipation, away from the reason of the Enlightenment; away from a critique of the religion that send religion earthbound after chasing it from the sky; away from a faith in science that reduces its spirit to a technical mastery of the world; and away from a progressist vision of history that subordinates the potential for emancipation to the necessities of the history of domination.<sup>186</sup>

Rancière then continues with the insight that Horkheimer and Adorno, by way of a genealogical criticism of Marxist reason, present us with a “new version of the original sin of Greek rationality according to Nietzsche,” where “Socrates’ fault becomes that of Ulysses’ resisting the songs of the sirens.”<sup>187</sup> This ‘new’ version, however, is the same inasmuch it “resides in the Apollonian hubris of the knowledge that wants to forget its Dionysiac side, the shadow-side that links it to the mythical world and the ‘obscure forces of life.’”<sup>188</sup> Fully aware of this identification alone being reductive, Rancière is quick to add that Adorno and

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<sup>183</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Dialectic in the Dialectic,” *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010b) 24.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

Horkheimer “of course [...] link their denunciation of that original sin to the critique of social domination.”<sup>189</sup> *Their Ulysses*, in plugging the sailors’ ears, in obliging them to serve his own renunciation of enjoyment, “identifies the success of the common rational undertaking with the capitalist law of domination,” and is thus “strictly opposed to Nietzsche’s ‘plebian’ Socrates.”<sup>190</sup> However, Rancière’s thought accords crucial importance to the fact that “this gap” is “made” against the background of a “common presupposition,” i.e. of a “grand historical destiny of Western reason, construed as the accomplishment of an original sin.”<sup>191</sup> Rancière thus posits a kind of speculative identity, in Hegelian terms, of Adorno and Heidegger:

As such their critique of capitalist reason or of the culture industry thus appears much closer than it would like to the other great transformation of the Nietzschean primal scene, the one developed by the philosopher that Adorno riddles with his sarcasms; it appears as the leftist rejoinder to the Heideggerian critique of western metaphysics and its accomplishment in the technological domination of the world. There is, in short, a dialectic of the dialectic of reason. It strives to accomplish the interminable task of Marxist critique: to cut, at last, the umbilical cord linking the promises of revolutionary emancipation to the dangers of Enlightenment reason.<sup>192</sup>

According to Rancière, then, it is this “dialectic in the dialectic” which founds the “melancholic version” of Marxist critique and gives it an “ambiguous destiny” – the history of which can be traced through the Situationist critique of the spectacle and various less radical post-Marxist theories of culture, despite the fact that *Dialectic of Reason* “denounces in advance any such use of its critique” through its *radical* (in the “root” sense of the word) attack on the separation of labour and enjoyment.<sup>193</sup>

Its argument is precisely that art, or the authentic culture that one claims to be upholding against the culture industry, stem from the same principle. Thus “civilized barbarism depends on the first exclusion,” which founds an order of domination that cannot be reconciled through cultural critique and artistic practices alone, which in turn brings us back to what Rancière deems the book’s being “hackneyed by its copies.”<sup>194</sup> Rancière sides with the profound motif that separates Adorno and Horkheimer from the “inanity of those weepers

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. 25f.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid. 26

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

who periodically wallow about art's ruination in cultural commerce and politics.”<sup>195</sup> Such gestures of separation, or purification, rather serve to obscure Adorno's fundamental insight into the double character of art – art's (relative) autonomy *and* fait social (total) – which harbours an emancipatory promise that cannot, however, be fulfilled in or through art, nor through its sublation into the praxis of everyday life, as long as social relations themselves remain characterized by domination.

While Rancière consciously resorts to a Kantian notion of critique as the ‘inquiry into conditions of possibility or grounds for emergence’ – in this case, of political dissensus – the concept of the culture industry can be said to be an integral part of what Rancière calls “police” and its reproduction of consensus, since, as Bernstein emphasizes, “the effectiveness of the culture industry depends not on its parading an ideology, on disguising the true nature of things, but in removing the thought that there is any alternative to the status quo.”<sup>196</sup> Adorno writes:

The culture industry turns into public relations, the manufacturing of ‘goodwill’ per se, without regard for particular firms or saleable objects. Brought to bear is a general uncritical *consensus* [my emphasis], advertisements produced for the world, so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement.<sup>197</sup>

And what is more, Adorno does not picture consumers as ‘happy idiots’ who are simply deceived by the culture industry:

People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them. [...] The most ambitious defense of the culture industry today celebrates its spirit, which might be safely called ideology, as an ordering factor. [...] The consensus which it propagates strengthens blind, opaque authority.<sup>198</sup>

In line with his own aesthetic theory, then, Rancière reminds the reader that Horkheimer and Adorno's “profound motif” of denouncing the separation of labor and enjoyment goes further back than the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism and ‘bourgeois’ Enlightenment

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid. 26f.

<sup>196</sup> Jay M. Bernstein, in: Adorno 1991, 10f.

<sup>197</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” *The Culture Industry*, ed. and with an introduction by Jay M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991) 100.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid. 103.

thought: “Through the intermediary of Hölderlinian poetry, it harks to that which is without a doubt the veritable founding text of the modern thought of emancipation, Friedrich von Schiller’s *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*. ” As mentioned earlier, Rancière repeatedly refers to Schiller’s ‘letters’ as the founding text of aesthetic politics, precisely because Schiller counterposes to the “established social division between the barbarism of the civilization of the Great and popular savagery [...] that chance at common humanity – at reconciliation in the sensory world – constituted by beauty.”<sup>199</sup> Rancière thus stresses that the force which separates *Dialectic of Enlightenment*’s denunciation from all the contemporary commonplaces, lies in its refusal to yield on that fundamental aesthetic promise – “on that horizon of a common sensible humanity.”<sup>200</sup> Moreover, it lies in the materialist radicalization of the theme of the promise. Whereas the Romantic readers of Schiller made of “art’s beautiful totality” the “prefiguration of the free community,” for Adorno and Horkheimer, on the contrary,

art only perpetuates the promise at the price of breaking it, of inscribing in itself the sustained wound, the unresolved contradiction of every transfiguration of reality into a beautiful aesthetic appearance. This is the radicality which provides the denunciation of cultural banality with its force of anger. The problem is not that this banality brings art down to the level of the ‘masses.’ The problem is that it is a machine for satisfying all the needs, including ‘elevated’ ones, which deprives art of its force of deception [sic], and therefore of its potential for emancipation.<sup>201</sup>

For Rancière, “this “small difference is essential.” But it also points to a lack in Frankfurt School thinking which simultaneously weakens its radical critique. The problem here, as Rancière forcefully insist, is not that Frankfurt School Marxism is culturally elitist, nor that it is ‘too tainted with utopianism.’ Rather, it is in fact “missing the same thing that ‘realist’ forms of Marxism are missing: a *political* conception of emancipation.”<sup>202</sup> Rancière’s criticism of Adorno is thus twice removed not only from Lukács’ praxisist dismissal of the “Hotel Abyss,” but also from popular Cultural Studies accounts of Adorno’s ‘spiteful’ Kantianism and alleged High modernist elitism.

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<sup>199</sup> Rancière 2010ab, 27.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid. Notwithstanding Adorno’s famous assertion, that “whoever thinks is without anger in all criticism,” it would certainly be pedantic to protest Rancière’s conclusion. Interestingly, Adorno’s sentence was used in *Der Spiegel* (1977, 43: 214) as the headline for a brief article on the relationship of the Frankfurt School to another, very different, vanguard: the RAF terrorist cell.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

Further, in order to explicate what most clearly distinguishes Rancière's approach from "cultural Marxism," it is necessary to return once more to the so-called "Brecht-Lukács" debate. It is worth noting, and becoming readily apparent in the light of Rancière's work, that all the involved parties (from Bloch to Benjamin to Adorno to Sartre) ground their aesthetico-political logics in a sociological analysis and evaluation of particular, more or less 'discrete,' social subjects (workers, advanced workers, the (petty) bourgeoisie, political parties, bourgeois/Marxist intellectuals) as well as the condition, as it were, of 'modern subjectivity' in general. Thus, instead of showing what ties aesthetics to politics, and vice versa, by means of a critical genealogy of the *very notions* of "aesthetics" and "politics," from which Rancière derives conceptual resources and concepts such as the "partition/distribution of the sensible" and the "aesthetic regime of art", mid-century Cultural Marxists – notwithstanding their marked differences – usually theorized the dialectical relationship of individual and society as mediated through works of art under (late) capitalist conditions. Resting on varying conceptions of *mimesis*, it is this dialectical approach to art and society which prompts a decidedly metapolitical, materialist critique of constitutive subjectivity and which assigns, in turn, to art the function of (immanent) social critique. It is also this specific dialectical approach that Rancière's aesthetic and political theory circumnavigates (in French post-Marxist 'fashion') to the effect that it can accord theoretical primacy to the complex relationship between art, aesthetics, and political dissensus, i.e. that which reconfigures *le partage du sensible* and redefines what counts as 'the political'.

By contrast, Adorno's writing, for instance, is specifically concerned with art and society rather than aesthetics and politics. *Aesthetic Theory* suggests a critical hermeneutics of modern art which does not address the problem of political subjectivity as such, but reflects on the work of art and its reception, i.e. the aesthetic experience of modern art, as the site of non-identity, the encounter with 'the new' as opposed to the ever-sameness of the commodities of the culture industry, and the last vestige of utopian thought. Although, as Adorno put it in *Minima Moralia*, "[t]he cult of the new" is always already political in the sense that it is "a rebellion against the fact that there is no longer anything new" in a reified society – the expression of a desire to move beyond modernity's aporias, which can never be realized in the realm of art.<sup>203</sup> Thus "[t]he cult of the new" might either nourish hope, if only in the form of a 'negative' utopia, or suffocating despair. For a politicized avant-garde in a postmodern, late-capitalist society however, "the new" in the sense of the absolute new, "the

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<sup>203</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005 [1950]) 237f.

chimera of the thing never known”, which ultimately “resembles death,” is thoroughly undesirable as the total ethico-political horizon of art.<sup>204</sup>

Contrary to Benjamin’s notion of the “aestheticization of politics”, Rancière’s notion of the “politics of aesthetics” does not point to the ideological function of style and fashion at the heart of Fascism’s attempt at naturalizing social phenomena but, to the contrary, radical contingency. The fascist utilization and appropriation of artistic forms actually presents a breach with the aesthetic regime and a reactionary move backwards to a Platonic idea of artifices in the service of molding a communal ethos – hence the censorship of virtually all avant-garde and modernist forms of art under the aesthetically paradoxical rubric of *Entartete Kunst*. The very possibility of free aesthetic play and the dissensuality it may produce on the part of the subjects suggests that aesthetics is a form of dissensus, that its logic is anti-totalitarian, and finally, that there is an aesthetic dimension inherent to any emancipatory politics. As Rancière himself has noted, “[his] inquiry points to the tensions and contradictions which at once sustain the dynamic of artistic creation and aesthetic efficiency and prevent it from ever fusing in one and the same community of sense.” Thus he has refuted charges of ‘romantic anarchism’ by claiming that a critical genealogy of art and politics is “not a matter of romantic nostalgia or anarchism” but instead facilitates the task of “set[ting] up in a more accurate way the issue of what art can be and can do” in a time of political consensus.<sup>205</sup> Here Rancière’s theory, more explicitly perhaps than Adorno’s, puts the issue of class and other social divisions back on the agenda (of avant-garde studies and critical aesthetics), not by means of deconstructing romantic ideology, but a rethinking of aesthetics as a form of dissensus.

What Rancière’s theory of political subjectivity necessarily fails to address, as Žižek underlines, is the level of economic form, i.e. global capitalism’s reproduction-through-excess, and, increasingly, capital accumulation through dispossession. According to Žižek, post-Althusserian theorists of politics and neo-Gramscian theorists of hegemony “from Balibar through Rancière and Badiou to Laclau and Mouffe” aim at “the reduction of the sphere of economy (of material production) to an ‘ontic’ sphere deprived of ‘ontological’ dignity.” Within this horizon then, there is no longer any place for the Marxian critique of political economy.

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid. 238.

<sup>205</sup> Rancière 2009b, 81.

The relationship between economy and politics is ultimately that of the well-known visual paradox of the ‘two faces or a vase’: one either sees the two faces or a vase, never both of them – one has to make a choice. [...] The political critique of Marxism (the claim that, when one reduces politics to a ‘formal’ expression of some underlying ‘objective’ socio-economic process, one loses the openness and contingency constitutive of the political field proper) should thus be supplemented by its obverse: the field of economy is IN ITS VERY FORM irreducible to politics – this level of the FORM of economy (of economy as the determining FORM of the social) is what French ‘political post-Marxists’ miss when they reduce economy to one of the positive social spheres.<sup>206</sup>

Intertwined with this political-economic “parallax,” as Žižek puts it, are the pressing questions of who has access to what kind of discourse in the first place and what material, physical and psychosocial constraints on subjective agency exist today that help reproduce the post-political, neo-liberal consensus.

While Rancière has indeed been criticized by a number of contemporary Marxist theorists for lapsing into a kind of Romantic anarchism fueled by nostalgia for the great populist movements of the past, Žižek has generally supported his ideas enthusiastically. Following Žižek, it can be argued that it would be false to frame criticism of Rancière’s ideas in terms of the historical opposition between Marxism and anarchism. Even if Rancière’s political theory is “more Jacobin than Marxist,” his insights are crucial to contemporary critical theory. According to Žižek, his most elementary contribution to critical aesthetics and a theory of political subjectivization, is the following one:

[Rancière’s] assertion of the aesthetic dimension as INHERENT in any radical emancipatory politics. This choice, although grounded in the long French tradition of radical political spectacle, goes against the grain of the predominant notion which sees the main root of Facism and other totalitarianisms in the elevation of the social body into an aesthetic-organic Whole.<sup>207</sup>

Against Benjamin’s aphoristic, frequently misunderstood, but nowadays dominant notion of the fatal “aestheticization of politics,” Rancière puts forth a different understanding of the relationship between the politics of aesthetics, on the one hand, and the aesthetics of politics, on the other. The inescapable meeting ground between the two, according to Rancière, is a “primary aesthetics” – a historically specific, material, and discursively hegemonic *partage*

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<sup>206</sup> Slavoj Žižek in: Rancière 2004, 75f.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid. 76.

*du sensible*. Contrary to any attempt to taint aesthetics as inherently totalitarian, Žižek follows Rancière in arguing that “the shift from the political to the aesthetic is inherent in the political itself,” because “the aesthetic metaphor in which a particular element stands for the Universal, is enacted in the properly political short-circuit in which a particular demand stands for the universal gesture of rejecting the power that be.” In the opposite direction, i.e. with respect to the terrain of ideological struggle, “a universal conceptual position is always ‘schematized’ in the Kantian sense of the term, translated into a specific impressive set of images.”<sup>208</sup>

What is of crucial importance here, according to Žižek’s reading of Rancière, and arguably missing in the work of such important critical theorists of hegemony, and ideology, as Gramsci and Althusser, is the realization that “these poetic displacements and condensations are not just secondary illustrations of an underlying ideological struggle, but the very terrain of this struggle.”<sup>209</sup> Thus if what Rancière refers to as “*la police*” focuses on the policing of subjects and subjectivities, i.e. “the clear categorization of every individual, of every ‘visible’ social unit, then disturbing such orders of the visible, the sensible, the perceptible, and proposing different lateral links, unexpected short-circuits, etc.,” according to Žižek, “is the elementary form of resistance.”<sup>210</sup> In this context, the politicized writing and performance practice of Bruce Andrews can be understood as a specific contribution to this ideological struggle – an idea which will be resumed in CHAPTER II.

Avoiding economic reductionism and simplistic models of mediation between the sphere of production and the realm of culture, Rancière’s ‘politicization’ of continental aesthetics can be said to suffer instead from an anti-sociological bias. However, it suggests a powerful post-Marxist framework for studying avant-garde aesthetic practices and provides a powerful (broadly New Historicist) analysis of the paradoxical metapolitics of art as well as the dissatisfactions it frequently entails on the part of contemporary avant-gardists and theorists, who in turn try to bypass rather than understand and take advantage of the paradoxes of the aesthetic regime. Be it by trying to impose an ethical norm on avant-garde art, or by trying to escape the art world through forms of artistic political activism outside of institutionalized spaces and discourses – only to be recuperated and institutionalized as art in ever shorter intervals. To quote Rancière once more:

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid. 76f.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

There is no art without a specific form of visibility and discursivity which identifies it as such. There is no art without a specific distribution of the sensible tying it to a certain form of politics. Aesthetics is such a distribution.<sup>211</sup>

What might be productively studied, then, besides specific avant-garde aesthetic politics and new artistic practices, are the discursive and non-discursive strategies employed by artists, critics, theorists, and philosophers, as well as cultural institutions, to affect our modes of reception and perception – the discursive formation of art critical, literary, and aesthetico-political paradigms and their underlying dissensual or consensual *raison d'être*.

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<sup>211</sup> Rancière 2009a, 44.

## I.9 Whose Afraid of a Critique of Subjectivity? Towards a Neo-Marxist Critique of Rancière’s “Emancipated Spectator [Reader, Listener]”

An emancipated community is in fact a community of narrators and translators.

– Rancière<sup>212</sup>

[...] as a consequence ‘everyone speaks’, but no one listens.

– John Roberts<sup>213</sup>

In his most recent theoretical contribution to the problem of art, aesthetics, and politics, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière presents what Oliver Davis deems “a more persuasive and more coherently theorized account of politicized art,” in general, and critical theatre and avant-garde performance, in particular. As the book’s title suggests, it is a critical-theoretical reflection on what it means to be a spectator who encounters art in the aesthetic regime – a critique which can easily be extrapolated, I think, to reading or listening. In line with his trademark critique of sociological theoreticism and anti-egalitarian pedagogy, Rancière conceives “emancipated, active, spectatorship,” according to Davis, as the “mode of engagement with the artwork which most fully realizes the egalitarian promise inherent in the aesthetic regime of art.”<sup>214</sup> Interestingly, Rancière considers this disposition of the spectator invariably under threat not so much from the culture industry (as in Adorno) or the spectacle (as in Debord) but from artists trying to ‘teach’ their audience, or readership, the ‘truth’ about social relations and a particular political message. This criticism is extended to artists who seek to intervene in the world directly with the purpose of reconfiguring social relations, if only on a micro-level, which points to “an understanding of the artwork which owes more to the ethical or representational regimes than the aesthetic.”<sup>215</sup> For Rancière, as Davis explains, this jeopardizes the emancipatory metapolitics of art in the aesthetic regime.

The implication of Rancière’s analysis is that in their concern to convey a certain political message and elicit a certain response in the spectator they revert to the mimetic or representational

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<sup>212</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009b) 22.

<sup>213</sup> Roberts 2010, 78.

<sup>214</sup> Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010) 154.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

regime and so produce something which not only falls short of art but which also fails respect the interpretative autonomy of the spectator.<sup>216</sup>

Davis is not the only critic who has noted the affinities of Rancière's development of the concept of active or "emancipated" spectatorship with the "liberating moment when literary theory discovered that there was something called 'reading' which was not the same as following, or 'appreciating', every turn and trope of the text and the recognition within film theory of the spectator's capacity to recombine and re-experience the work."<sup>217</sup> In marked difference to high modernist doxa, it is the autonomy of the spectator (her intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic capacities) that, according to Rancière, needs to be respected, not the alleged autonomy of the cultural artefact itself. "Art can allow people to see the world and their own place in it differently," Davis sums up Rancière's argument, "which may in turn lead them to intervene in it and change it by becoming political subjects, yet it can only do so as art by respecting their autonomy as spectators."<sup>218</sup> It can be argued, however, that such a theoretical position is no less problematic than Adorno's in its absolutist rejection of any "direct politicization" and therefore pedagogical compromise of art, even as Rancière tries to secure the interpretative autonomy of the emancipated spectator instead of locating the work's emancipatory *Gehalt*, what Adorno called non-propositional "truth content," in its encounter with the philosopher.<sup>219</sup> The following paragraphs will thus be dedicated to critiquing Rancière's notion of "emancipated spectatorship," reading, or listening, with a view to implementing a neo-Marxist corrective to Rancière's anti-sociological bias in the process of theory application.

Rancière calls for and engages "a radical differentiation from the theoretical and political presuppositions which, even in postmodern form, still underpin the gist of the debate on theatre, performance, and the spectator," arguing that "the numerous critiques for which theatre has provided the material throughout its history can in effect be boiled down to one basic formula," which he calls the "paradox of the spectator."

This paradox is easily formulated: there is no theatre without a spectator [...]. But according to the accusers [Brecht, Artaud, Debord, etc.], being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid. 153f.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid. 155.

<sup>219</sup> Cf. Adorno 2004, 118ff.

production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive.<sup>220</sup>

If, as Rancière suggests, spectatorship is construed in this fashion, “[t]o be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.”<sup>221</sup> Now, what Rancière further suggests, in considerably polemical fashion, is that if one starts out with such a notion of spectatorship, the most logical solution to be deduced from it would the infamous Platonic one: “that theatre is an absolutely bad thing: a scene of illusion and passivity that must be abolished in favour of what it prohibits – knowledge and action; the action of knowing and the action guided by knowledge.”<sup>222</sup> A “true community,” in the Platonic and thus archi-ethical sense, “is therefore one that does not tolerate theatrical mediation; one which the measure that governs the community is directly incorporated into the living attitudes of its members.”<sup>223</sup> Rancière’s reference to Plato signals that what is at stake here, again, is the possibility and status of appearances and thus the common terrain of the aesthetic and the political. While Plato’s ultimate solution has not prevailed among critics of theatrical mimesis, Rancière claims that they have invariably retained its premises while changing the conclusion: “What is required is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs.”<sup>224</sup> Even if the “two main formulations” of this “switch,” as Rancière calls it, “are conflicting, [...] the practice and the theory of a reformed theatre have often combined them.”<sup>225</sup>

Here, at last, one recognizes more specific objects of critique that Rancière is working toward – the Brechtian and Artaudian critical paradigms of politicized theatre that have been so influential in the development of (not just) avant-garde theatre and performance. Summing up the basic attitudes encapsulated in Brecht’s “epic theatre” and Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty,” Rancière writes:

For one, the spectator must be allowed some distance; for the other, he must forego any distance.  
For one, he must refine his gaze, while for the other he must abdicate the very position of viewer.  
Modern attempts to reform theatre have constantly oscillated between these two poles of

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<sup>220</sup> Rancière 2009b, 2.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid. 2f.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

distanced investigation and vital participation, when not combining their principles and their effects.<sup>226</sup>

And:

According to the Brechtian paradigm, theatrical mediation makes [spectators] conscious of the social situation that gives rise to it and desirous of acting in order to transform it. According to Artaud's logic, it makes them abandon their position as spectators: rather than being placed in front of a spectacle, they are surrounded by the performance, drawn into the circle of action that restores their collective energy. In both cases, theatre is presented as a mediation striving for its own abolition.<sup>227</sup>

The historical influence of these critical paradigms is well known. And it can be found to a different extent in various Language Poets' adaptations of Artaudian, Brechtian and Debordian paradigms – frequently via *Tel Quel* and Roland Barthes – to a politicized experimental writing practice. For Rancière, in fact, it is Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*<sup>228</sup> which establishes a critical paradigm that both of the preceding models can draw on in their essentially Romantic desire to have theatre “embod[y] the living community.”<sup>229</sup> Consequently, Rancière sets out to denounce the Debordian critique of the spectacle on the basis that it ultimately relies – despite its apparent anti-Platonic stance – on Plato's concept of *mimesis*.

What in fact is the essence of the spectacle for Guy Debord? It is exteriority. [...] The malady of spectating man can be summed up in a brief formula: “the more he contemplates, the less he lives.” The formula seems to be anti-Platonic. In fact, the theoretical foundations of the critique of the spectacle are borrowed, via Marx, from Feuerbach's critique of religion. The basis of both critiques consists in the Romantic vision of truth as non-separation. But that idea is itself dependent on Plato's conception of *mimesis*. The “contemplation” denounced by Debord is contemplation of the appearance separated from its truth; it is the spectacle of the suffering produced by that separation: “Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle.” What human beings contemplate in the spectacle is the activity they have been robbed of; it is their own

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>228</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 1983).

<sup>229</sup> Ibid. 9.

essence become alien, turned against them, organizing a collective world whose reality is that dispossession.<sup>230</sup>

It is this neo-Marxist critique of alienation, and its extension to theatrical, or literary, fictions conceived as a kind of surplus-alienation, that Rancière considers counter-productive to any emancipatory politics, avant-garde or otherwise, thus demanding that its principles be re-examined, in order to critique the “set of equivalences and oppositions, that underpin their possibility.” For Rancière, such equivalences (“between theatrical audience and community, gaze and passivity, exteriority and separation, mediation and simulacrum”) and oppositions (“between the collective and the individual, the image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-ownership and alienation”) above all serve to compose “a rather intricate dramaturgy of sin and redemption.”<sup>231</sup> My own scepticism concerning this criticism derives from the fact that – much in line with his critique of critical theory’s performative reproduction of inequality – Rancière does not distinguish between a neo-Marxist notion of social truth and a Platonic notion of universal ethical truth. Neither does he differentiate carefully between the Platonic “abolition” or “banning” of theatre and the mimetic arts, on one side, and a neo-Marxist project aimed at “sublating” theatre, and aesthetic appearance more generally, where “sublation” is to be understood in the Hegelian sense of *Aufhebung*, on the other. In any case, however, it can be assumed that Rancière consciously rejects the decidedly meta-political framework of Debord.

John Roberts points out the significance of Rancière’s “familiarity with the critique of this kind of regime-thinking [the critique of the spectacle and consumer society] in Anglo-American cultural studies,” as it is precisely the “engagement with the indeterminacies of spectatorship and the fissures of ideological interpellation in such cultural and artistic theory since the late 1970s that has allowed Rancière’s critique of post-1960s regime thinking [...] to develop and find an audience outside of France.”<sup>232</sup> Roberts is certainly correct in noting the emergence of an “interesting entwinement” between Rancière’s work and the legacy of Anglo-American cultural studies. Since Rancière’s early critique of Althusser and structuralism “paralleled the rise of Anglo-American cultural studies’ critique of Althusser and the emergence of the notion of the ‘creative’ or ‘resistant’ consumer,” while many of his

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<sup>230</sup> Rancière 2009b, 6f.

<sup>231</sup> Rancière 2009b, 7.

<sup>232</sup> Roberts 2010, 71f. Robert’s reference is to Stuart Hall’s *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* (Birmingham: CCS, 1973) and John Fekete’s *Modernity and Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), in particular. It is perhaps Kristin Ross who, as a translator and sympathetic critic of Rancière’s work, has contributed most significantly to its sustained reception in Anglo-American cultural studies.

books have appeared in English with considerable delay, it has only gradually become obvious, “how much of his theory of counter-interpellation through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s has chimed with the counter-hegemonic theories and non-passive cultural subject of Anglo-American cultural studies in the same period.”<sup>233</sup> However, while Rancière’s work allows continued space for the ‘resistant’ spectator/reader and advances a strong methodological commitment to “the presence of philosophy in cultural theory and art theory and the presence of cultural theory and art theory in philosophy,” it is also a turning away from the idea of a critical hermeneutic as well as a turning away from the notion of a cultural semiotics – perhaps the most central theory/method in Anglo-American cultural studies.

For Rancière, as Roberts notes, the task of the critical theorist, is not to provide a “historicism account of the work’s formation,” nor a “theoretical exegesis of its conceptual ramifications.” Rather, she is to provide “an articulation of [the work’s or text’s] emancipatory or critical content for those – the non-professional majority – who might appropriate it in their own interests.” Rancière’s critical theory thus advances the notion of a ‘return’ to a Kantian notion of critique, which he considers better suited to facilitate political subjectivization and intellectuals’ solidarity with political struggles, and to provide social movements with more constructive theoretical concepts by means of inquiry into the conditions of possibility for social transformation through politics.<sup>234</sup> There is a clearly discernable tendency in Rancière’s work to properly politicize theoretical practice by opening up space for the political subjectivization of the spectator/reader as someone who is able to “construct their own poem, their own film, with what is front of them; and then they prolong it in words.”<sup>235</sup> Accordingly, Roberts regards Rancière’s position to be “clearly indebted to a tradition of ‘reader-response’ theory – from Valentin Voloshinov to Jürgen Habermas to the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies –,” and one might want to add Hans-Robert Jauss, Roland Barthes, and Wolfgang Iser to this list, “where the value of interpretation lies in how it enters the life-histories, life-struggles and life-narratives of the spectator/reader [...].”<sup>236</sup> It is at this point that Roberts spots a paradox in Rancière’s position. For if cultural texts and works of art essentially are transitive points in an endless and

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid. 72.

<sup>234</sup> Cf. Jacques Rancière, “The Importance of Critical Theory for Social Movements,” (October 23, 2009) public lecture available through [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUTHDo\\_hhe0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUTHDo_hhe0). (March 12, 2011).

<sup>235</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Jacques Rancière and Indisciplinarity” interview by Marie-Aude Baronian and Mireille Rosello (trans. Gregory Elliot), *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 2:1 (2007), available at <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/jrinterview.html>.

<sup>236</sup> Roberts 2010, 73.

fluctuating conversation without prior expectations or vocation, Rancière's indebtedness to a notion of the 'common' spectator, reader, or listener, certainly is

accompanied by a particular ideological reticence in his understanding of the modernist counter-hegemonic role of art. This derives from a general unwillingness on his part – in many ways antithetical to this legacy of reader-response theory – to countenance any partisan ideological role for the artwork that the 'common' spectator and reader defers to, on the grounds that the spectator and reader are, according to this logic, placed in the position of the passive recipient of the work's would-be critical beneficence. In other words, partisan critique in art – as another invidious example of interpretative mastery for Rancière – further prevents the extended conversation of cultural democracy taking place.<sup>237</sup>

The critical question, in other words, is thus: how can a critical/politicized modernist work or text exploit, as it were, the common reader/spectator by exercising its interpretative mastery, or authority, on the recipient if she is an emancipated spectator/reader/listener who is able to construct "their own poem, their own film, with what is front of them; and then [...] 'prolong it in words'" in the first place? This question seems all the more pressing if she is at the same time able to resist more popular texts' various conceivable attempts at ideological interpellation. Does this not imply an idea of different degrees of likelihood of, if not interpellation, solicitation, i.e. of different modes of reading solicited more or less successfully by specific artworks or texts in concrete *social* situations? Rancière's concept of discursive forms of performative reproduction of inequality, while congenial to a critique of political philosophy and vulgar sociological rejections of aesthetics, tends to become aporetic in its application to reader-response criticism and theoretical bias against all sociologically informed art criticism and theory.

More specifically, the problem here does emphatically not reside in Rancière's notion that equality should not be posited as *telos* (and thus be indefinitely deferred) but has to be assumed as an *a priori* condition of politics and polemically verified, or enacted, in order to be realized in the now. Rather, Rancière's concept of emancipated spectatorship/reading/listening is inherently contradictory insofar as it pits the emancipatory capacity of the reader against the artwork's or text's force of interpellation, or perhaps solicitation, of non-egalitarian modes of reading. To put it crudely: an emancipated reader

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

will resist that force of interpellation/solicitation in the process of reception, imagination, and critical reflection if “emancipation” is to mean anything.

[...] the partisan political content that Rancière is so fearful of, that is so threatening to the democratic spectator, is no different in its capacity to take on an aestheticizing function as any so-called non-political work.<sup>238</sup>

All of this, of course, hardly could have escaped Rancière’s notice. And one might caution against Roberts polemical account of a “fearful” Rancière who considers partisan political content a threat to the democratic spectator, reader, or listener. What he seems to be worried about most and thus critiques forcefully in his analysis of the interpretative models governing some of the most influential, now canonical, strategies of politicized art, avant-garde or otherwise, is the unproblematic aligning of artistic technique – whether critical distanciation (Brecht, Debord) or surrealist-dionysic ritual (Artaud) – with any calculable, or deterministic, ‘political’ effect on the readerly subject or audience, and the different understanding of the very notions of emancipation and politics at stake. To a certain extent, Rancière “inherits Adorno’s strictures,” as Roberts puts it, on the direct politicization of art and the limits of social critique on the basis that

the emancipatory effects derived from such works are either vague and non-verifiable or utterly presumptuous and after the fact. There is much to agree with Rancière (after Adorno) on this question [sic]: the belief in the transparency or direct potency of social critique in art is a recurring leftist phantasm that has historically overburdened the politics of art. Rancière’s solution to this problem, however, is very different to Adorno’s – the linking of the re-functioning of art’s autonomy to an ethics of fidelity on the part of the spectator to the work’s absolute singularity – namely, that the production of conversation in response to the artwork – as a process of political subjectivization – is valuable: less as a result of a collective process of critical position-taking, than as a free exchange of interpretation as an instance of democracy in action.<sup>239</sup>

Notwithstanding the significance of Rancière’s egalitarian critique of what might be called critical theory’s and partisan political art’s performative reproduction of inequality, I agree with Roberts that “such strictures on ‘mastery’, politics and knowledge in art stores up all kind of problems, which a commitment to the free-ranging ‘common’ spectator and reader cannot solve or obviate.”<sup>240</sup> In *The Emancipated Spectator* Rancière scrutinizes precisely where the relations between author, artwork, image, mass culture, spectator and politics might

<sup>238</sup> Roberts 2010, 77.

<sup>239</sup> Roberts 2010, 73.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

be properly and practically located – an ambitious project, in the course of which he attacks what Roberts calls “the three most familiar cultural/political solutions presented by artistic theory as a critique of the prevailing regime-thinking.” These ‘solutions,’ which are not discrete and therefore can, and have been combined, by various artists and theorists, may be paraphrased and summed up as follows: a) “modernist historicism,” according to which abstraction and non-representation presents an advance over the representational logic of the system as a whole, in a world where all images and texts circulate in the interests of capital; b) “dissolution of distance,” i.e. the distance between artwork and spectator, in favour of a celebration of unmediated festivity, or carnival, over spectacle since the (post-) situationist critique of capitalism is essentially the critique of distance inherited through Marx from Feuerbach; and c) “avant-gardism,” the notion that art is at its most political and persuasive when it adopts an avant-garde role, predicated on the belief that art’s singularity lies in its continuous powers of negation.<sup>241</sup> Roberts cogently sums up why Rancière thinks of these ‘solutions,’ or critiques, as “misadventures of critical thought.”<sup>242</sup>

For Rancière all these critiques position art in the *wrong place*, so to speak, in so far as they all base their engagements and solutions on a false equation between, either, emancipation and the overcoming of apartness through the immediate or future rejection or suspension of mediation, or, emancipation as the direct mediation into the social process as an overcoming of apartness; the notion of the artistic autonomy of the avant-garde as a pre-figuration of the eventual dissolution of apartness itself.<sup>243</sup>

Since neither pole addresses adequately, as it seems, “the aesthetic labour required in the reordering and redistribution of the sensible, or common, forms of appearance as part of an emancipatory politics worthy of its name,” Rancière seems to prefer, in some sense, “to withdraw art from the challenges of cultural praxis.”<sup>244</sup> Accordingly, he rejects the idea that emancipation in art, or through art, is about “the future bridging of the gap between artwork and audience” (which the spectacle is held to reproduce), or the “eventual closing of the gap between a politicized art and a depoliticized public sphere,” thus dismissing the notion “that art somehow needs to be in another place, a better place, in order for it to do its emancipatory work.”<sup>245</sup> If there are no outsides, or utopian ‘no-places’, available to cultural producers and

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<sup>241</sup> Cf. Ibid. 74f.

<sup>242</sup> Rancière 2009b, 25ff.

<sup>243</sup> Roberts 2010, 74.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid. 74f.

consumers, as Rancière insists, then the available (representational) places – the properly political terrain of ideological struggle and dissensual framing of identity and alterity – should determine the conflicted relations between author, artwork, and mass culture.

For Rancière there is no prospect or possibility of a ‘take over’ of the sensible; the avantgarde’s insistence on apartness as a precursor to the dissolution of apartness similarly leads, in his view, to the subordination of the sensible to an imposed emancipatory aesthetic/political programme. On the contrary, the job of emancipatory culture – of in-disciplinary strategies and energies – is to provide a network of aesthetic production (in collaboration with political subjects) that intervenes in, challenges and inverts the hierarchies and exclusions of the sensible, in shifting, motile and heterogeneous ways.<sup>246</sup>

The reorganization of the sensible across aesthetics and politics, is a continuous process of mediation on the exclusions and hierarchies of the sensible – hence the structural importance of de-placement to Rancière’s schema of in-disciplinarity and the democratic spectator. Rancière uses the notion of “heterology” to refer to the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed. Accordingly, he understands “the dream of a suitable political work of art [as] in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as vehicle.”<sup>247</sup> Spaces for participation and exchange are produced through the ‘improper’ collaboration between a common aesthetic programme and political subjects as cultural praxis and collective activity always proceeds through disunity and dis-identification.<sup>248</sup> Following Roberts, one can say that there exists “a palpable tension” within Rancière’s theoretical framework.

On the one hand, his constructivist dissolution of art into cultural practice – into reshaping the materiality of things ‘from below’ – places his thinking in line with the great emancipatory thrust of aesthetics and politics from 1917 onwards, and should be applauded. Similarly his attempt to clear out all the accumulated idealist (actionist), nihilist (iconophobic) and positivistic (reflectionist) tendencies of this artistic legacy should also be defended, and recognized accordingly as the baseline for advanced thinking on art and politics today. Yet, at the same time, his disconnection between knowledge, mastery and art, is too invested in the rights of the (cultured excluded) spectator to make these things tell as a shared class identity. Thus politics and

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid. 75.

<sup>247</sup> Rancière 2004, 63.

<sup>248</sup> Cf. Roberts 2010, 75.

art only seem to function in the flight from collective power; as a consequence ‘everyone’ speaks’, but no one listens.<sup>249</sup>

What Roberts laments, is of course exactly what Rancière’s theory affirms – the anarchic dimension of a radical democratic politics. Furthermore, Roberts himself explains succinctly why Rancière would stress the liminality, temporality, and precariousness of both the aesthetic and the political:

[G]iven that there is no organic relationship between the workers movement and avant-garde culture – and indeed precisely because there has not been for a very long time – nothing is to be expected from official or organized channels of opposition. The struggle, therefore, is to liberate ourselves from these false expectations and their ugly histories.<sup>250</sup>

But the crucial issue, Roberts adds, “is *how and in what ways* you hold on to the gap between critical cultural practice and its ‘real forms of efficiency’, and not to the validity of this principle itself.” As Žižek has repeatedly pointed out, in *The Ticklish Subject* and elsewhere, Roberts notes that Rancière’s “quasi-poststructuralist flight from externally ‘imposed’ notions of collectivity, unity, identity, organisation, and political action may take the fight to those self-deluding forces on the left (and right) that assume such notions as unproblematically good things.”<sup>251</sup> Unfortunately, however, for all its obvious virtues, his “democratic spectator simply vacates the more difficult terrain of mediation between a collective emancipatory politics and the ‘avant-garde’, or neo-avant-garde.”<sup>252</sup> For Peter Hallward, Rancière’s “trenchant egalitarianism seems all too compatible with a certain degree of social resignation,”<sup>253</sup> which is perhaps too harsh a judgment about a thinker who has done much to re-politicize key cultural and political categories – Rancière, as Roberts insists, “is no postmodernist *avant la lettre*.”<sup>254</sup> Nonetheless, it points to one of the more persistent problems facing the theorization of cultural politics and the politics of art and aesthetics today, i.e. the practices and metaphors of “deterritorialization” (Deleuze), “disidentification” and “dissociation” (Rancière) slide too easily into capitalist rationale.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Roberts 2010, 78.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Peter Hallward, “Staging Equality: On Rancière’s Theatocracy.” *New Left Review* 37 (January–February 2006) 126.

<sup>254</sup> Roberts 2010, 78.

Perhaps the most pointed critique of Rancière's "theatocratic" concept of politics still has been formulated by Hallward. With respect to the implications of Rancière's thinking as regarding the domains of knowledge and praxis – of both art and politics – Hallward writes:

Rancière's relative indifference to questions of organization and decision leaves little place for direct engagement with the issues that pose the most obvious challenge to his egalitarian stance – those bound up with the forms of knowledge, skill or mastery required for effective political action, as much as for artistic innovation or appreciation. No doubt nothing is more theatrical than purely improvised work, but by the same token there is no form of theatre (to say nothing of music) that requires more skill or experience.<sup>255</sup>

Clearly, Rancière thinks that the appearance of the *demos* shatters any division between those who are deemed able and those who are not. But, as Hallward asks, "is the old relation of theory and praxis, intellectual and worker, so easily resolved? Does political action no longer need to be informed by a detailed understanding of how the contemporary world works, how exploitation operates, how transnational corporations go about their business?"<sup>256</sup> Hallward's criticism of what he considers Rancière's problematic indifference toward a theory of praxis as well as questions of political organization and elaborate collective strategy ends on the following note.

[T]he theatre is never more theatrical than when it finds new ways of blurring, without eliminating, its boundaries with the non-theatrical. It may be, however, that any such innovative blurring can only continue, in the domain of both politics and art, if it is illuminated by a decisive commitment that is itself organized, unequivocal, categorical and combative. In the field of recent critical theory, there are few better illustrations of this point than the consistency and resolve that have over the last three decades characterized the development of Rancière's own project.<sup>257</sup>

Hallward suggests, in other words, that Rancière's own project might actually be understood as a highly organized, combative, strategic, and collaborative aesthetico-political endeavour akin to avant-garde praxis.

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<sup>255</sup> Hallward 2006, 126. Hallward's essay shows how "theatocracy" (sovereignty of the audience), which is condemned in Plato's *Laws* is reinstalled as a radical principle of egalitarian politics in Rancière's work and examines the implications and limitations of his approach.

<sup>256</sup> Hallward 2006, 127.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid. 129.

If the police order's most effective means of forestalling politics in our time of consensus is indeed, as Rancière claims, a 'non-interpellation' of the subject – the inverted version of Althusser's "hey, you there!," that takes the form of the "move along, there is nothing to see!,"<sup>258</sup> then this certainly implies the successful reproduction of the acceptance of consensual social practice on the part of the subject – an ideologically functional discursive formation 'securing' the depoliticization of appearances by positing an identity between sense and sense. In other words, how does the police order's *partage du sensible* – reproduce itself and thwart political subjectivity other than by consensual practice that would involve the policing of subjectivities, for instance, by means of repressive tolerance? Rancière's answer to such questions, which seem of crucial importance to politicized art, is simple:

The exploited rarely require an explanation of the laws of exploitation. The dominated do not remain in subordination because they misunderstand the existing state of affairs but because they lack the confidence in their capacity to transform it.<sup>259</sup>

As politically tempting as this position seems to be at first sight, it does not simply reject positions of intellectual mastery but loses sight of the fact that politicized art does not necessarily, and certainly not exclusively, address itself to "the dominated." In fact, it sometimes addresses itself to the "dominating," and quite frequently to those who are situated in-between.

Without naively resuming the avant-garde figure of the producer, one might recall here Benjamin's notion, in his discussion of Tretiakov and Brecht, of that "solidarity" between the bourgeois intellectual artist and the working class which is by necessity a "mediated" one, as well as Aragon's insight that "the revolutionary intellectual appears, first and foremost, as a traitor to his class of origin."<sup>260</sup> In light of Rancière's theory, the perception of Aragon's "revolutionary intellectual" as a "traitor to his class of origin" clearly involves and must be predicated by a dissensual operation, or aesthetico-political disidentification with one's subject position. It is thus difficult to see why Rancière would be, as I put it above, "afraid of a critique of subjectivity." Especially, if such a critique comes in the form of avant-garde aesthetic politics of Brechtian or Debordian provenance, where it is the explicit appreciation

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<sup>258</sup> Cf. Rancière 2010a, 37f. "The police say that there is nothing to see on the road, there is nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space of circulation is nothing other than the space of circulation."

<sup>259</sup> Rancière, 2009, 45.

<sup>260</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer (1934)," trans. John Heckman, *New Left Review* I:62 (July-August 1970): 83-96, 90, 95f.

of equal but systematically suppressed creative, emotional, and intellectual capacities of “the dominated” that prompts a concurrent critique of bourgeois subjectivity.

There exist, of course, social patterns which impact the reception, perception, and experience of art insofar as its recipients are social subjects. Thus, various neo-Marxist theorists have accorded to modern art the function of social critique – in particular a critique of constitutive subjectivity – since the site of contestation in the reception and experience of art, obviously, is first of all the subject of that experience. If social relations are to a significant extent determined by global capitalism and its “cultural logic”, and thus reified and continually reproduced, both materially and discursively, according to the logic of capital accumulation (increasingly now by “dispossession”<sup>261</sup>), it does not come as a surprise that various neo-Marxist thinkers and politicized avant-gardes alike have accorded to art the function of critique. But “causality in art,” as Adorno puts it in one of his late essays on modern music, “bears an extra layer of subjective mediation” – an “extra layer” that finds expression in both production and reception.<sup>262</sup> In other words, art and aesthetic experience are shot through with dialectical tensions, which a critical hermeneutic would have to think through and to which Adorno’s aesthetic theory attempts to measure up.

For Rancière, whose primary concern is how to think through the relationship between the politics of aesthetics, on the one hand, and the aesthetics of politics, on the other, what is most important is that aesthetic experience creates distance, which allows for “free appearances” and thus “free aesthetic play,” in the very Schillerian understanding of the term, rather than signifying some “ludic postmodernism” as advocated by Susan Sontag or diagnosed by Hal Foster.<sup>263</sup> Rancière’s Foucault-inspired archaeology of the “aesthetic regime” wants to lay open again from the ‘discursive rubble’ of sociologically informed art theory the emancipatory ‘kernel’ of aesthetics, as it were, by rethinking it as a form of dissensus, and by “politicizing its terminological foundation.”<sup>264</sup> Notwithstanding Rancière’s claims to the opposite though, a wholesale rejection of a Hegelian/Marxist notion of critique for its allegedly anti-egalitarian logic which entails the performative reproduction of inequality in favor of a decidedly Kantian notion of critique – “re-examined perhaps by

<sup>261</sup> For a detailed analysis of neo-liberal “capital accumulation by dispossession” cf. David Harvey’s *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2006) 41ff.

<sup>262</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*. (London: Verso, 1992) 293f.

<sup>263</sup> Cf. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), 3-38, and Hal Foster’s introduction to *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983) xii.

<sup>264</sup> Cf. Peter Grabher’s critical review of Rancière’s *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, which is accessible through rezens.tfm (2009/2) <[http://rezensfm.univie.ac.at/rezens.php?action=rezen\\_sion&rez\\_id=77](http://rezensfm.univie.ac.at/rezens.php?action=rezen_sion&rez_id=77)>.

Foucault”<sup>265</sup> – as opposed to Adorno’s attempt of dialectically wedding them, risks lapsing into idealism by downplaying existential material constraints on human agency and the power of ideologically functional discourses over social body-subjects by the same token. It might also lead away prematurely, I think, from the notion of avant-garde praxis.

Rancière’s critique implies that meaningful politicized art, in order to ‘produce’ emancipated spectators, readers, or listeners, must ‘assume’ them as a point of departure. This resembles the constitutive pedagogical paradox encapsulated in the Kantian question “*Wie kultiviere ich die Freiheit bei dem Zwange,*”<sup>266</sup> which certainly applies to strategies and methods of politicized art as well. Moreover, Rancière’s critique of such strategies that construe seeing, reading, or listening as passive only to pride themselves on their power to activate the spectator, reader, or listener by any means – as if activity were intrinsically valuable – is well taken. The proliferation of various forms of ‘activation’ solicited by ‘interactive commodities’ in an age of, as it were, ‘culture industry 2.0’ as well as phenomena such as viral marketing, guerilla marketing, flash mob marketing, and all kinds of public relations events and incentives, may be cited in support of Rancière’s argument. However, as opposed to such trivial and instrumentalized forms of activation, Brecht’s model of a social modernism, Debord’s incitement to *dérive* and *détourné*,<sup>267</sup> and Artaud’s surrealist-dionysic ritual, notwithstanding their “pedagogical” or “archi-ethical” constraints on aesthetic autonomy, emphatically endeavour to capacitate the subject substantially in terms of both aesthetic experience and political reflection.<sup>268</sup>

Building on Rancière’s challenging writing on the complex relationship between art, aesthetics, and politics, it will be argued in the following chapters, that there exist avant-garde or “post-avant-garde” models and aesthetic politics which effectively synthesize a radical artistic critique of constitutive subjectivity with a dissensual politics of aesthetic capacitation. Such a politics would have to solicit a specific aesthetico-political mode of reading that facilitates radical praxis and might aid future acts of political subjectivization, while

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<sup>265</sup> Rancière 2004, 13.

<sup>266</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis,” *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*, Werkausgabe XI (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991) 432.

<sup>267</sup> Cf. Debord 1983, where he asserts: “*Détournement* is the flexible language of anti-ideology” (114). The “*dérive*” is defined by Debord as “a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances,” and the need for the *dérive* is necessitated, according to situationist theory, by the increasingly predictable and monotonous experience of everyday life trudged through every day by workers in advanced capitalism, cf. Guy Debord, “Theory of the Dérive,” *Les Lèvres Nues* #9 (Paris, November 1956), reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste* #2 (Paris, December 1958), trans. Ken Knabb.

<sup>268</sup> Cf. Rancière 2010a, 136f. Rancière describes the Brechtian and Artaudian models respectively as “pedagogical” and “archi-ethical.”

conceiving of methods to substantially capacitate the readerly subject, spectator, or listener in terms of both aesthetic experience and critical reflection instead of narrowing down possibilities for aesthetic experience and lapsing into didacticism. Moreover, politicized avant-garde practice has an important socio-practical dimension – it creates its own counter-hegemonic context in which a particular aesthetic politics is collaboratively forged and participation is encouraged. Critical reflection on this social *and* aesthetico-political nexus is what is absent from Rancière's account. Rather than rejecting Rancière's theory on the basis of its anti-sociological bias, however, it should be supplemented with a neo-Marxist sociological corrective to prevent an idealist reading of Rancière.

A too reductive (Marxist) reading of Rancière, on the other hand, is suggested by Walter Benn Michaels, in an otherwise cogently argued article which focuses on the “form of the photograph” and its status in contemporary aesthetic theory. Michaels straightforwardly identifies Rancière's as a “neoliberal aesthetics.” Challenging Rancière’s “axiom of equality,” Michaels writes with reference to Wendy Bottero's contribution to *Who Cares about the White Working Class*.<sup>269</sup>

With respect to the functioning of capital, however, and what Bottero [...] describes as its tendency to generate “large numbers of low-wage, low-skill jobs with poor job security”, it's not at all obvious that intellectual equality is the crucial question [...]. After all, those low-wage, low-skill jobs wouldn't be made better if the people who held them were better educated. And the amount of education required to do them isn't keeping even higher skill jobs from becoming lower-wage ones: underpaid Ph.D.s teaching English composition are as much the victims of neoliberal redistribution as underpaid check-out clerks at Wal-Mart. Which is just to say, there's no economic version of the axiom of equality

Besides the somewhat problematic suggestion that underpaid Ph.D.s are on a par in terms of economic exploitation with check-out clerks as Wal-Mart, Michaels blinds out both the materialist grounding of Rancière's theory and the primacy which it accords to politics (and social movements) when he critiques the politics of Rancière's analysis on the assumption that such

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<sup>269</sup> Cf. Wendy Bottero, “Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Who Cares about the White Working Class*, ed. Kjartan Páll Sveinsson (London: Runnymede Trust Report) 7-14, available through <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/WhoCaresAboutTheWhiteWorkingClass-2009.pdf>. (August 18, 2011).

[analytic] politics in which the only objectionable hierarchies are precisely those of vision – have proven both in theory and practice to be entirely compatible with the intensification of a hierarchy of wealth that, not produced by how we see ourselves and each other, cannot be undone by how we see ourselves and each other. All of which is just to say that in neoliberal politics, as in neoliberal aesthetics, the structural difference between capital and labor (a difference that no degree of identification can alter) is imagined out of existence.

Michaels tends to forget that Rancière's is a highly nuanced analysis of what ties the individual aesthetic experience of a work of art to politics. Far from denying the structural difference between capital and labor, Rancière simply holds that this structural difference cannot determine the individual aesthetic experience. Rancière actually sides with Adorno at his most radical – the belief that this structural difference is impossible to overcome by means of cultural practice, whether art or theory. Contrary to Adorno's scepticism, however, Rancière emphatically affirms that radical social change can only be effected through politics. All of these positions and questions form a complex terrain of critical and political thought which is difficult to survey and impossible to pace within the scope of this thesis. If I have devoted so much space and time to discussing some of the most influential critical positions on art, aesthetics and politics, it is because this theoretically contested terrain is at the same time that of politicized avant-gardes, and artists like Andrews, who reject the idea of the impossibility of politically meaningful cultural praxis in a 'postmodern context.'

## I.10 Methodological Considerations: Rancière, Language, and Poetics

At first sight, Rancière's theoretical framework does not seem to be particularly suited to adequately account for the particularities of contemporary avant-garde, or late-modernist, experimental poetics, in general, and the particularities of Andrews's highly idiosyncratic and innovative poetic techniques, in particular. However, there are analytical concepts to be found in Rancière's theory – if somewhat scattered throughout his writing – which are, in fact, congenial to an aesthetico-political understanding of such poetics and bear some resemblance to the work of Jerome McGann and that of Roland Barthes.<sup>270</sup> The two most relevant notions here, with regard to this study, are: first, “the regime of the page,” and, second, the idea of the “paratactical surface” of the page as “interface,” both of which will be explicated and taken up as critical concepts in my discussion of Andrew's writing practice. What follows is a theoretical discussion of the implications of Rancière's work regarding language and poetics, which entails some important methodological considerations.

Rancière's theory does not at all foreclose a language-oriented, as it were, aesthetico-semiotic, approach to modernist poetics. However, Rancière is not interested in a structuralist view of language as ‘the system of signs’ or ‘structured totality’ that is associated with the linguistic turn and tends to dominate critical discussions of Language Poetry. Rather, he is interested in both speech and writing, and by extension its verbal performance or recorded audio text, as aesthetico-political domains in which redistributions of the sensible are ‘played out.’ In an interview with Davide Panagia, Rancière describes his break with the work of Louis Althusser in terms of a shift away from a hermeneutic reading of texts towards a more affirmative view of language.<sup>271</sup> Especially since the events of 1968, Rancière moved away from a critique based on the Saussurean distinction between language (“*langue*”) and speech (“*parole*”), between the underlying and ‘unconscious’ structures and the cultural, social, and political texts determined by those structures. As noted by Arsenjuk, Rancière has distanced himself “from this kind of reading based on suspicion towards an approach that is more affirmative of the surface itself. The surface no longer hides, but becomes a scene on which the creativity and effectiveness of language games and speech acts are demonstrated.”<sup>272</sup> Such theoretical issues are particularly important in view of a discussion of Andrews's textual

<sup>270</sup> Cf. esp. Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) and Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1975).

<sup>271</sup> Cf. Davide Panagia, “Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière,” *Diacritics* 30:2 (Summer 2000) 113-26.

<sup>272</sup> Luka Arsenjuk, “On Jacques Rancière,” *Eurozine* (March 2007) 7.

practice, which builds to a significant extend on neostructuralist and constructivist tenets and concepts, which generally figure prominently in Andrews scholarship as well. One advantage of Rancière's theory here is that it allows for a conceptualization of Andrews's textual politics in *aesthetic* terms, focusing on the reading experience and its aesthetic dimension rather than on linguistic structure as such.

Rancière bases his poetic account of language and writing on a rereading of Plato's critique of writing in his *Phaedo*.<sup>273</sup> The written word, which Plato refers to as "orphan," is always a supplementary element in relation to the communal order. It can liberate itself from a social situation in which the roles of the proper addresser and the addressee, as well as the limits of what is sayable and how, are strictly determined. The written word can be appropriated by anyone. Unlike the individual utterance of the spoken word which is tied to "the logic of the proper", the written word, unexpected and inexhaustible, presents a certain "wandering excess" in relation to the world of carefully distributed roles, tasks and the speech that is understood as properly belonging to the individuals and groups that are seen as performing these roles and tasks within the communal order: "[t]he democracy of writing is the regime of the letter which is free for anyone to take up for themselves."<sup>274</sup> This excess of words over the existing distribution of the common that establishes the communal order, for Rancière, represents the egalitarian power of language – which Rancière calls "literarity" – the ability to disturb the existing circuits of words, meanings and places of enunciation. The specific historical *dispositif* of "literarity," for Rancière, again, is to be found in the "aesthetic revolution."<sup>275</sup> It is through the emergence through the early German Romantics' concept of an overarching art of writing as such – literature – that language becomes the subject, or matter, of the work rather than merely the transparent medium of reference to a represented subject.<sup>276</sup>

Rather than relying on Althusser's faith in the power of ideological interpellation, Rancière insists that what guarantees that appearances remain as they are is the power of circulation itself; *la police* want us to continue to see things as we are accustomed to seeing them, to continue to operate with the same standards of visuality and aurality that have always

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<sup>273</sup> Cf. Plato's "Pheado: The Last Hours of Socrates," *Project Gutenberg*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (October 29, 2008) <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/1/6/5/1658/1658-h/1658-h.htm>. For a critical comparison between Rancière's and Derrida's reading of Plato's account of writing as opposed to speech cf. Oliver Davis, *On Jacques Rancière* (Cambridge: Polity 2010) 107ff.

<sup>274</sup> Jacques Rancière, in: Davis 2010, 127.

<sup>275</sup> Cf. Rancière 2004, 5, 39f., 87; 2010, 115ff.

<sup>276</sup> Davis 2010, 103ff.

been in place.<sup>277</sup> If Rancière has distanced himself substantially from Althusser's theoretical position, he has never abandoned the premises that sparked his initial critical break. Following Panagia, it can thus be argued that Rancière's dissensus is nothing less than "an interruption of the indexical competence of human knowledge [and] a disruption in the correspondences between perception and signification."<sup>278</sup> Panagia suggests that some relevant aspects of Rancière's aesthetic analysis of politics are equally available in reading texts: "In each instant a composition holds its shape because of a set of perceptual conditions that make some parts inside the frame relevant."<sup>279</sup> Panagia further asks the reader to

[i]magine [...] the old grade-school exercise of parsing a sentence. The idea of this formal exercise is that the sentence is a composite unit divisible into parts or shares, each of which has a functional purpose, whether predicative, descriptive, indicative, etc. More importantly, however, the parsing operation can function if and only if the requisite parts in question (verb, noun, preposition, etc.) can be seen or heard. When parsing a sentence, for instance, no one in their right mind would make the space between the words count as a relevant unit of analysis unless that space were – forwhatevertypographicreasons – missing or truncated thus disrupting the flow of the sentence. In other words the sentence – like the [community] – relies on a particular sensibility that ensures the self-evidence of some elements all the while obscuring others. This sensibility guarantees the compositional unity of the collection of parts making it so that collectivities can persist on the basis that they remain sensible, by which Rancière means not simply meaningful but also palpable and available to our perceptual competencies (i.e. available to be sensed).<sup>280</sup>

This suggests that the parsing of a sentence enables reading by providing the criteria that give sense to the distribution of words on a page. Following Rancière, Panagia describes this procedure as "the regime of the page [...] a paradigm of visuality that orients our postures of ocular attention in such a way that what emerges as relevant to our reflective considerations are those forms of written expression that make sense."<sup>281</sup> It thus simultaneously discloses visibilities through a parsing operation that determines what is and is not available to sense perception, what does and does not make sense. Eventually, the "regime of the page" prioritizes the (poietic) making of sense because the sensible (understood in Rancière's sense) enables the fluid circulation of values. Within the regime of the page, "things like marginalia,

<sup>277</sup> Cf. Rancière 2010a, 37-40; cf. Davide Panagia, "The Improper Event: On Jacques Rancière's Mannerism," *Citizenship Studies* 13:3 (2009): 287-308, 299.

<sup>278</sup> Panagia 2009, 300.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid. 300f.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid. 301.

notes and other extraneous indexical material simply don't count because the possibility of their being visible requires an alternative mode of perceptibility (like the gloss, for instance) that would make the shape of these sensual intensities worthy of attention.”<sup>282</sup>

In the case of avant-garde or experimental poetics, it is obvious then, that the idea of the regime of the page, and the specific *partage du sensible* effected by it, is what modern poets work with and against as it constitutes the possibilities for violating or challenging it in the pursuit of new meanings, new ways of making meaning, and aesthetic forms which make them available to the senses. Because our human sensorium is disposed and organized according to a perceptual arrangement that guarantees specific forms of awareness to specific things. These dynamics of the sensible, as Panagia emphasizes,

suggest that our capacity to comprehend things is grounded in a contingent organoleptic configuration that constitutes the self-evident dispositions of a sensing body: we always-already know what it means to sense, what seeing, touching, and hearing are. Such assurances and the practices of sense-making that enable them are, by definition, political. They relate our bodies to the world, but also determine the conditions through and by which we might sense the world and those who occupy it; in short, such regimes of perception confer what counts as common sense.<sup>283</sup>

Such a model lends itself particularly well to an analysis of Andrews's textual practice which works in and against the regime of the page in extremely sophisticated ways as will be shown in chapter II.1.

Rancière's notion of a *partage du sensible* and the idea of the dissensual practices of aesthetics and politics as that which breaks up the consensual framing of art and the political can be said to resonate in some way with Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive metaphor theory which points to the impact of linguistic/cognitive frames and framing processes on how we conceptualize social reality. Lakoff and Johnson's most important (quasi-Lacanian) finding was that “metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words.”<sup>284</sup> Rather, “human thought processes are largely metaphorical [i.e.] the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person's conceptual system.”<sup>285</sup> While a philological consideration of poetic metaphor in Andrews's writing would be very much

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid. 302.

<sup>284</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 6.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

beside the point (in fact, Andrews's writing for the most part eschews, or ‘sabotages’ poetic metaphors), the concept of cognitive framing seems crucial given its aesthetic and political dimension. In a commonly ignored chapter on aesthetic experience, Lakoff and Johnson note that “since metaphor is a matter of conceptual structure,” the framing process involves

all the natural dimensions of our experience, including aspects of our sense experiences: color, shape, texture, sound, etc. These dimensions structure not only mundane experience but aesthetic experience as well. Each art medium picks out certain dimensions of our experience and excludes others. Artworks provide new ways of structuring our experience in terms of these natural dimensions. Works of art provide new experiential gestalts and, therefore, new coherences [...] aesthetic experience is thus not limited to [art]. It can occur in any aspect of our everyday lives – whenever we take note of, or create for ourselves, new coherences that are not part of our conventionalized mode of perception or thought.<sup>286</sup>

For Rancière, literature possesses something like its own “democracy,” which tends towards a “dispersal of individualities,” towards the “construction of an impersonal stratum” that is precisely opposed to the idea of an apportionment of subjective positions of enunciation like those proposed by politics. What nevertheless ties it to politics, however, is the fact that it can facilitate “a certain capacity for experiencing, defiantly claim a capacity to experience everything and to participate in any kind of enjoyment, be it material or mental.”<sup>287</sup> In other words, everything in literature can be re-appropriated aesthetically by the reader – “seized upon.” While Rancière’s examples of such re-appropriation chiefly concern 19<sup>th</sup> century Realist novels and Symbolist poetry, it is important to emphasize that re-appropriation in this context does not at all refer simply to content, or elements of the plot. When Rancière suggests that “the writers of ‘negritude’ seized on the ‘negro’ of *Une saison en enfer* and Rimbaud’s idea of a language accessible to all the senses, this does not imply that writers like Aimé Césaire or Henry Dumas had any desire to mimic Rimbaud’s representations of Blacks – nor the Surrealists’ – which they actually challenged by re-appropriating their writing

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. 235f. Lakoff and Johnson use the following example to point to the ideological impact of cognitive framing: “Labor is a resource. Most contemporary economic theories [...] treat labor as a natural resource or commodity, on a par with raw materials, and speak in the same terms of its cost and supply. What is hidden by the metaphor is the nature of labor. No distinction is made between meaningful labor and dehumanizing labor. [...] When we accept the labor is a resource metaphor and assume that the cost of resources defined in this way should be kept down, then cheap labor becomes a good thing, on a par with cheap oil. The exploitation of human beings through this metaphor is most obvious in countries that boast of a ‘virtually inexhaustible supply of cheap labor’ – a neutral-sounding economic statement that hides the reality of human degradation” (237).

<sup>287</sup> Jacques Rancière, Marie-Aude Baronian and Mireille Rosello, “Jacques Rancière and Indisciplinarity,” trans. Gregory Elliott, *Art & Research* 2:1 (Summer 2008), available through <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/jrinterview.html> (March 12, 2011).

aesthetically thus providing new forms of dissensus and new possibilities of political enunciation. Accordingly,

The question of the canon is not of much interest to me, since I don't treat literature as an art charged with transmitting a certain cultural legitimacy, and hence with classifying claimants to that legitimacy. [...] The politics of the novel is then inscribed in a conflict between regimes of signification. For me the issue of the democracy of literature is to be found here. The problem is not doing justice to everyone, creating a balance between male literature and female literature, French literature from France or francophone literature from Canada, Africa, the Caribbean. The important thing is, on the one hand, the democracy practised by literature itself and, on the other, the democracy that is going to be practised by those who appropriate it.<sup>288</sup>

Since democracy, for Rancière, is not a matter of “a programme assigning so-called ‘minority groups’ their respective weight,” he readily approves of contesting taught canons and introducing post-colonial, women’s, and queer literatures, while insisting that literature’s political significance does not consist in giving those who have long been oppressed their rightful part (in the canon). Rather, for Rancière, literature’s democracy consists in “sharing out a certain battle with the dominant language – for example, the way in which writers like Césaire have activated the language of Rimbaud or the surrealists against the finely polished language of official French literature.”<sup>289</sup> In any case, Rancière’s notion resonates strongly with Andrews’s emancipatory call – in line with his activity in and around *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* – to “repossess the word”<sup>290</sup> and to help “create the bastardization of language that it promises itself to be,”<sup>291</sup> detailed critical analysis and a broadly Rancièrean reading of which are provided in CHAPTER II.

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, ed., *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984) ix.

<sup>291</sup> Andrews 2010b, 95.

**II BRUCE ANDREWS AND THE AESTHETIC POLITICS OF POST-AVANT-GARDE WRITING  
AND PERFORMANCE: “TO FACILITATE RADICAL PRAXIS”**

## II.1 Defying Reification's Gravity: Radical Re-aestheticization of Language in Andrews's Early Writing Practice

### II.1.1 Aesthetic Politics and Language-Centered Poetics: Edge, Acapella, Love Songs, and "Swaps Ego"

A *practice*, based on this definition of the medium: to create conditions under which the productivity of words & syllables & linguistic form-making can be felt, & given aesthetic presence. To make the word the basis of extensions. [...] To politicize – not a closure but an opening.<sup>292</sup>

In Andrews's early work from the 1970s there is a textual politics at work in the writing that aspires to re-aestheticize the word by suspending/frustrating reference and opening up the text for alternative ways of creating meaning. Those texts can be said to demand a high degree of reader participation as the writing critically explores the politics of the referent at the same time as it seeks to capacitate the reader in terms of free aesthetic play. The following chapter scrutinizes and problematizes some of the theoretical tenets of Andrews's early writing practice. Notwithstanding a partial critique, however, it will be argued that Andrews's is a genuinely materialistic and performative poetics that uses intransitivity as a means to direct our attention to the body as the site of language production, use, and reception, and that such awareness might well be the precondition for any critical re-meaning, i.e. an alternative semanticizing critically aware of and resisting the dominant modes of 'reality formatting' in and through language. Or rather, a specific use of language that, like capital, pretends to exits independently of and unaffected by social relations and human bodies.

Significantly, Andrews began writing experimental poetry while spending the summer of 1968 in Paris and doing PhD work on American foreign policy and imperialism, which would lead up to the publication of *Public Constraint and American Policy in Vietnam*,<sup>293</sup> in 1976. Ever since then, Andrews's work has expressed a serious aesthetico-political concern not so much with the 'abuse of language' as such, as is sometimes claimed, but with the abuse of

<sup>292</sup> Bruce Andrews, "Writing Social Work & Political Practice," *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984) 136.

<sup>293</sup> Bruce Andrews, *Public Constraint and American Policy in Vietnam* (London: Sage, 1976). Andrews's doctoral dissertation was originally titled "Empire and Society: Toward a Contextual Explanation of American Aims and Policy in Vietnam."

power and of official language as a means of social control – “the abuse of the public sphere.”<sup>294</sup> A central figure in “Language” poetry and co-editor, with Charles Bernstein, of the influential (post-)avant-garde journal of poetics and/as critical theory named *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Andrews has maintained, as Craig Dworkin puts it, “a consistently uncompromising position at the radical extreme of the literary avant-garde.”<sup>295</sup> Andrews’s early writing clearly continues and extends the avant-garde models provided by Russian Futurism, Dada, John Cage, Lettrism, Situationism, Fluxus, the *TelQuel* group, and perhaps most significantly the radical modernist experiments with ‘wordness,’ syntax, and the American tongue in the work of Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky. Andrews’s poetry, if we want to call it that, aggressively refuse assimilation to any conventionally available mode of reading, seeking to obviate the status quo by demanding new ways of thinking about and engaging language.

Premised on the idea of a profound ‘crisis’ not just of referentiality but representation – effected by what Lukács (and Adorno) would call the spread of reification throughout the totality (of social relations and cultural practices) and famously re-theorized in structuralist terms by Louis Althusser<sup>296</sup> – a central idea of a language-centered poetics has been to foreground the production of meaning by means of experimental writing that foregrounds the materiality of the signifier and explores “the politics of the referent.”<sup>297</sup> In Andrews’s words, this meant to “show the referent being politicizable, [...] showing how it’s constructed, showing what’s missing, showing what’s excluded,”<sup>298</sup> thus showing how, in Rancièrean terms, the references of language are being partitioned up and distributed. “To alter consciousness by disrupting language”, as Dworkin notes, “has long been the dream of a politicized avant-garde,” but Andrews’s poetics provide a theoretically sophisticated version of that idea – as will become more obvious when looking at some of his later theoretical writing – by “positing linguistic structures as analogous to social formations and recognizing the social ground against which even the most abstract play of the signifier occurs.”<sup>299</sup>

<sup>294</sup> Cf. Bruce Andrews, “Bruce Andrews Interview May 1990, Vancouver,” with Kevin Davies and Jeff Derksen, *Aerial* 9, ed. Rod Smith (Washington: Edge, 1999) 6f.

<sup>295</sup> Craig Dworkin, “Bruce Andrews,” *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Eric L. Haralson (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001) 13-15, 13.

<sup>296</sup> Cf. Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Penguin, 1969) 219ff. and Althusser 1971. Althusser’s reexamination of the connections between language, ideology, and the self is central language poetry, in general, and Andrews’s practice, in particular: “Like all obviousnesses, including those that make a word ‘name a thing’ or ‘have a meaning’ (therefore including the obviousness of the ‘transparency’ of language), the ‘obviousness’ that you and I are subjects – and that that does not cause any problems – is an ideological effect” (Althusser 1971, 171f).

<sup>297</sup> Steve McCaffery, et al., “The Politics of the Referent (Symposium),” ed. Steve McCaffery, *Open Letter* 3:7 (Summer 1977) n. pag.

<sup>298</sup> Appendix i, 233.

<sup>299</sup> Dworkin 2001, 14.

Isolating small constellations of grammatically and thematically disjunctive words, discrete syllables and graphemes/phonemes, Andrews's early texts create unprecedented combinations of letters and sound patterns analogous to the “transrational” *zaum* language conceived by Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh and related experiments by contemporary poets such as Clark Coolidge or P. Inman. Consciously working with and against what Panagia, following Rancière, calls the “regime of the page,” this early poetry focuses attention on typography, on sound, on the edges of linguistic particles and the way in which non-referential aspects of language can organize thematically disparate and grammatically disjunctive vocabularies. In his first chapbook, *Edge*, Andrews writes:

Most of my stuff is based on fragmentation and the qualities of words other than (and along with) their meaning. The words aren't related at the center but by their edges [...] – like the interrelated pieces of a non-representational ceramic sculpture. What's stressed is sound, texture, rhythm, space and silence. Those qualities seem to get obscured when we focus too strenuously on the word's “meaning” (which is the referential aspect of the words, the part that draws the reader's attention away from the words themselves). There's less “content” here [...] but hopefully the language becomes the content and the event, because the words don't have to be (primarily) transparent signposts to something beyond. The poems can be “self-referring” – with other “organizing principles” than the one of pre-set meaning. Sound, for example. I don't try to give up the feel of words, or treat them as just clumps of sound. The individual words have meanings and possible associations. It's just that these meanings and connotations aren't yoked together and aimed outside the poem at a single externally applied meaning [...] (a tightly knit network of references). The way words fit into a sentence or a line (or a line of thought) doesn't grab me as much as how they relate to the space and silence around them. I like the edges, discreteness, fragments, collision.<sup>300</sup>

Resulting from such idiosyncratic preferences are considerably enigmatic texts such as the following.

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<sup>300</sup> Bruce Andrews, *Edge* (Washington: Some of Us, 1973) n. pag.

creole

lint of  
shrugs off

hop  
shaying

whistle  
methane's foal

lickety-split

and blue

mint  
of that

and blue

buddy air

Fig. 1 from Bruce Andrews, *Edge* (Washington: Some of Us, 1973) n. pag.

Such a text may well be considered impossible to explicate in any conventional way. It thus solicits alternative modes of reading, which are more properly aesthetic, or “dissensual,” to use Rancière’s term. While the issue should not be conceptualized dichotomically, it can be said that such a text creates what in Kantian terms may be called a “lingering quality” that allows for free aesthetic play to a greater extent than more conventional (referential) modes of literary writing. Yet a close reading of the above poem reveals a number of classical poetic devices on a micro-level: the relative assonance of “creole // lint of / shrugs off // hop,” consonance (as in “mint / of that”), parallelism (“and blue / [...] / and blue”), and even alliteration (“blue // body”). One may even be reminded of Emerson’s notion of a “metre-making argument.” What is dramatically absent from the text, however, is syntactical coherence – it eschews normative grammar: is “creole” a noun, or an adjective, “hop” a noun, or a verb, “whistle” a verb, or a noun, “mint” a noun, or a verb, or an adjective, etc. Depending on the ‘choice’ of the reader then, syntactical possibilities shift and thus possible meanings shift – they are constantly produced in the act of reading. Moreover, many of the

terms have multiple lexical meanings, depending on the choice of which the meanings attributed to the poem as a whole vary – an extreme case of polyvalence and what Andrews calls “multimplication.”<sup>301</sup>

With regard to reference, which is impossible to abandon unless one operates below the level of the word, already the poem’s first word, “creole”, especially in connection with “shrugs off,” “shaying,” “whistle,” “blue,” and “buddy,” activates certain semantic fields and expectations – historically, politically, psychologically – on the part of the reader. Depending on the reader’s positionality, specific racial tropes, stereotypes, exoticisms, images of colonialism, slavery, and racial oppression, or anti-colonial struggles, civil rights, cultural hybridity, and multiculturalism may be activated and inform the reading of the text. Accordingly, the author of this thesis hardly recognized the homophonic pun of “and blue // buddy / air” resolved as “and blew body air,” which provides a key to a semantic decoding of the awkward phrase “methane’s foal,” but also opens up another ‘can of worms’ – what else can be read homophonically (e.g. “shaying” versus “shying,” or is it the more ‘obscene’ [sa]shaying?), and how does that generate new layers of meaning? Moreover, how exactly does one encode idiomatic vernacular expressions like “lickety-split” and “lint” – is the latter just a “fluff,” or is it a gendered cultural taboo linked to a discourse of propriety and the body? In any case, it is impossible not to activate cultural patterns in decoding or encoding the poem. But this holds true for all texts. The crucial point here is that Andrew’s politicized (and in this case acutely humorous) writing practice tries to solicit modes of reading through which the readerly subject would necessarily become aware of (or which reinforce the reader’s understanding) of her role as co-creator of meaning and the socio-cultural patterns, or dominant ideological modes, of meaning production. All of this will become much more pronounced with the “discursive turn” of his work in the 1980s, which develops a more thoroughly politicized method akin to Brecht’s social modernism. In order to better understand Andrews’s aesthetico-political framework and his radical experiments with language, however, it is conducive to further study the various methods of re-aestheticization in his early writing.

Consider, for instance, the following cluster of graphemes/phonemes from *Acapella*, another early work of Andrews’s, which is even more abstract, or rather, more concrete in its foregrounding of the materiality of language and composition below the level of the word.

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<sup>301</sup> Bruce Andrews, “The Poetics of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,” Talk delivered in the *Textual Operations* series, organized by A. S. Bessa, at White Box in New York City, September 25, 2001b, available through <http://www.ubu.com/papers/andrews.html> (May 1, 2011).

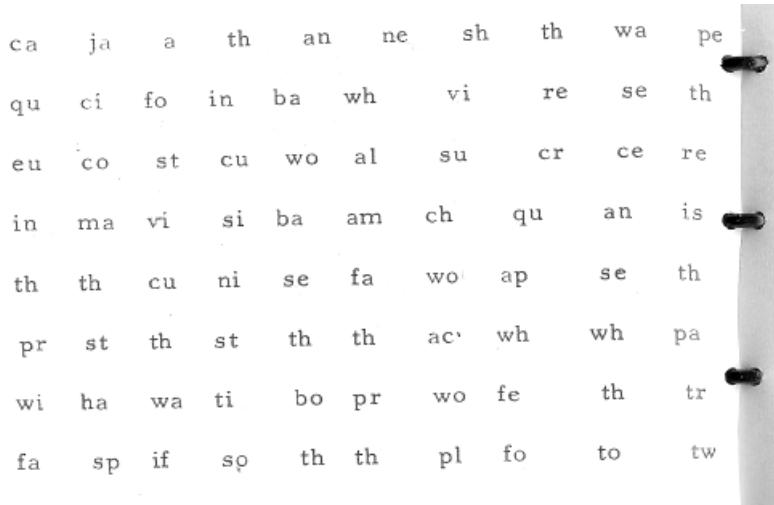


Fig. 2 from Bruce Andrews, *Acapella*, in: *Ghost Dance 17*, ed. Hugh Fox (Fall 1973) n. pag.

Hardly ‘readable’ at all – even the most abstract modes of pattern recognition seem to fail to produce semantic meaning here – the text directs attention to the coronal nature of the graphemes and the acoustic properties of the phonemes, thus directing the reader’s attention to the bodily processes of writing, reading and sounding. Moreover, what surfaces is the weight of the iconicity plus the weight of the possibilities to index. According to Steve McCaffery, “Andrews here takes the word beyond its lexical base (that base in definition where each word operates independently from out of its dictionary force of isolation) to the preverbal region of the operating letter.”<sup>302</sup>

Consider another piece from *Acapella* which operates below the level of the word, using instead 4-letter strings, which may, or may not have been, extracted from longer words:

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<sup>302</sup> Steve McCaffery, “The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centered Writing,” *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Supplement No. 1 – The Politics of the Referent*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (June 1980), n. pag.

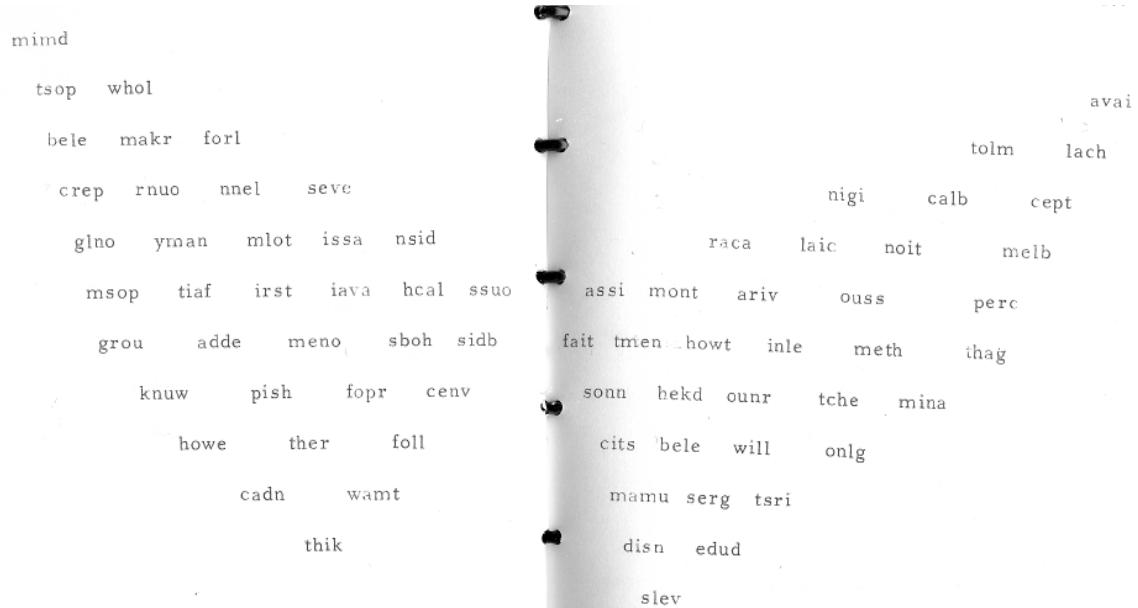


Fig. 3 from Bruce Andrews, *Acapella*, in: *Ghost Dance 17*, ed. Hugh Fox (Fall 1973) n. pag.

Again, language is made strange and the writing calls attention to the significance of what Viktor Shklovsky and other Russian formalist critics referred to as *ostranenie* – defamiliarization. “In the routines of everyday speech,” as Eagleton sums up the concept, “our perceptions of and responses to reality become stale, blunted, and as the Formalists would say ‘automatized’ [whereas] literature by forcing us into a dramatic awareness of language, refreshes these habitual responses and renders objects more perceptible.”<sup>303</sup> Besides the fact that the above example is extreme in its degree of defamiliarization, it self-reflexively refers back not just to its own properties but its own psycho-linguistic method (through its physical shape on of the space of the page) for it comes in the form of a Rorschach inkblot test – an obvious attempt to remind the reader that she is a ‘meaning making animal’ and to make her aware of the fact that human meaning belongs to the realm of the Symbolic, and that making meaning is reliant on cultural and psychosocial patterns.

Consider one more example from the same collection, “THE RED HALLELUJAH,” which title lends its word cluster a latent narrative charge, as it were, without ‘destroying’ the phenomenological sense of writing and reading as ‘wordness’ – of language as content and event – that Andrews’s early writing aspires to and which it attempts to solicit on the part of the reader by pushing Roland Barthes’s concept of the “writerly text,” as it were, to the extreme.<sup>304</sup>

<sup>303</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (London: Blackwell, 2008 [1983]) 3.

<sup>304</sup> Cf. Barthes 1975. Translated from Barthes’s neologisms “lisible” and “scriptible,” the terms “readerly” and “writerly” text mark the distinction between traditional literary works such as the classical novel, and those

pulling banters flank blonde  
folded captain girlfriend hisself  
drive leg chemist's punching  
fire milling cuffs naw  
captain madman ways roast  
bags excitedly ass bad

Fig. 4 from Bruce Andrews, *Acapella* (Fall 1973) n. pag.

Louis Zukofsky's modernist insistence that "the story must exist in each word"<sup>305</sup> comes to mind here as well. In the words of McCaffery, commenting on the above text, the self-standing word is the word which is "free from imposed context [and] resides within its lexical basis, within its total content. 'Blonde' holds a totality of content and a range of possible application that an additional (contextualizing) phrase – the blonde hairdresser – serves to restrict [...]." More significantly, to remove reference in the way language centered writing does, for McCaffery, means to radically alter the category of linguistic time. By removing tense as a temporal issue within a text, "through a centering of time utterly within the assertion (the happening) of each lexeme," one arrives at what he calls "cipheral time" – the time of each word happening and accumulating "into the total time of the text's happening itself, as text here is the duration of the reading."<sup>306</sup> While McCaffery's point of altering the category of linguistic time is well taken, one may wonder why exactly this sense of presence is preferable to other kinds of texts and modes of reading. For McCaffery, there is particular political value in language-centered writing's capacity

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twentieth century works that 'violate' the conventions of realism and thus 'force' the reader to produce a meaning or meanings which are inevitably other than final or "authorized." Barthes writes: "The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages" (5). For Barthes, the readerly text, like the commodity, disguises its status as a fiction, as a literary product, and presents itself as a transparent window onto "reality." The writerly text, however, self-consciously acknowledges its artifice by calling attention to the various rhetorical techniques which produce the illusion of realism. In accord with his proclamation of "The Death of the Author," Barthes, echoing Brecht on theatre, insists that "the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4).

<sup>305</sup> Louis Zukofsky, "A" (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993) 769.

<sup>306</sup> McCaffery 1980, n. pag.

to emphasize the tractable weight of the single word when freed from specific use; the open-endedness of its indexicality; its processual, non-commodity nature; the single word as the ingathered point of infinite application. [...] In a grammatical line of discourse, a word must assume a chosen context, and enter into a divisive labour. Freed, however, from the enforced communality that is grammar, the word approaches its own totalization and we are forced to encounter the word frontally as an absolute property.<sup>307</sup>

Before returning to this idea for critical discussion, it is mandatory to turn to some more examples of Andrews's experimental writing and its methods for re-aestheticizing language. The following poems are from a collection called *Love Songs*, published in 1982 but containing a series of about 150 texts from the mid-1970s. The organization of *Love Songs* is seemingly arbitrary; its overall structure defies conventional titling and sequencing. The various "love songs" found here range from visual/concrete poems and 'pure lettrism' through word clusters to intimations of song; some of these pieces are accompanied by actual directions for performance, even dance, (much in the manner of FLUXUS) and yet others increase the performativity of the text through typographic means. What all of them have in common is that they work with and against "the regime of the page" in extremely sophisticated ways, posing a challenge to conventional modes of reading and making meaning commonly associated with love songs and poems. Consider, for instance, "Song No 113,"<sup>308</sup> with its detailed instructions for sounding and performing the poem's words according to three acoustic parameters ("speed," "pitch," "volume") highlighting not only the physical properties of the words but also the corporeality of language, in general, and its sensuality and erotic delight, in particular. Yet, as Peter Quatermain notes, "if you stack *Love Songs* up against the great western tradition of love poetry it reads as an assault on the Liberal Arts."<sup>309</sup> For Quartermain, it seeks to "renew the physical and experiential grounds on which the great traditional themes are founded, by disqualifying not only the means of making sense but the very notion of sense as exterior to the experience."<sup>310</sup> Moreover, the semantic charge the words used in "Song No 113" posses when read against the background of the great Western tradition of love poetry, at the same time evokes a subtle lyricism and an obscene mockery thereof.

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Bruce Andrews, *Love Songs* (Baltimore: Pod, 1982) n. pag.

<sup>309</sup> Peter Quatermain, "Gettin Ready to Have Been Frightened: How I Read Bruce Andrews," *Aerial 9* (Washington: Edge 1999) 173.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

vy

pn

oea

Speed	Pitch	Volume	
			whenever thorough befoal hemis
↑			able again able cut
	↑		so negligibly
↑			fretful
↓			snake fuelling
			pep guard then than is
	↑		oral
↓			floor saints
			should curves all my go up
			moonshining
			beauties

No 29

ao  
isy  
bx  
oonern  
et  
hoa mino  
mms  
rbn  
fl  
yf  
oc

them into the words, “little flag” – a possible reference to patriotism as epitome of the indiscriminate acceptance of prefabricated meanings – although neither is spelled out on the page. Since some of its twenty ‘lines’ “slope uphill,” as Quatermain notes, the reader is tempted to read the letters in non-lexical clusters as well as in words, “and to see words where ‘in fact’ there are none.”<sup>311</sup> Love song “No 29” ends with a frenzied array of grouped letters on the page. But one tends to cluster its more or less unpronounceable groups of letters in curves: it is the eyes that make choices before the mind starts sorting possible meanings. With the eye coming to rest twice on “mms,” which

Love songs “No 73” and “No 29” remind the reader of the sheer physical (non-lexical) qualities of the words and encourage what Quatermain calls “topo-logical (and therefore improvisational) reading.”<sup>311</sup> The upper-case letters of “No 73” for instance are so arranged that the reader is strongly tempted to complete

I T L  
L G  
I T  
F A  
L A  
L I T L  
F L G  
I T L E  
L I T E  
F T E  
L T E  
I T L

Love Songs "No 73"

<sup>311</sup> Ibid. 168.<sup>312</sup> Ibid. 169.

is a possible onomatopoeic reference to erotic pleasure, choices include repeats and thus encourage the simultaneity of multiple readings. Opening up fields of possibility, the reading activity which is demanded by this kind of writing is specific in that

[...] the poems insist on the hermeneutic act whilst at the same time they withhold too much for it to be satisfactorily completed. By calling into question the notion of completion in reading and in language they force us, through the sheer impossibility of attaining certainty of meaning, to locate meaning in the very act of reading itself, in the play between possible signification and concrete referentiality.<sup>313</sup>

When several of the above explicated methods and techniques of Andrews's early experimental writing practice are coming together in the late 1970s in pieces such as "Swaps Ego," which will be studied more carefully in the following chapter, the initial effect upon the reader becomes truly unsettling:

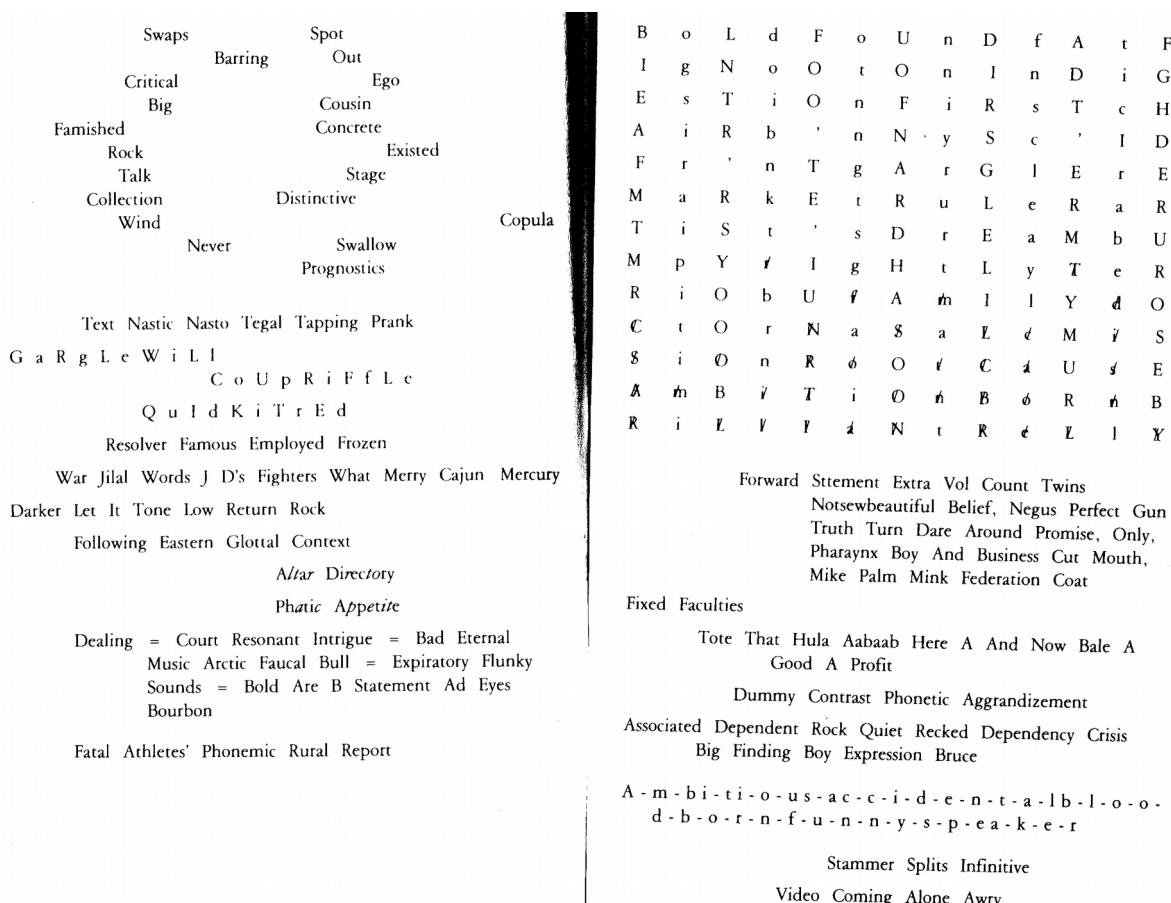


Fig. 5 from Bruce Andrews, *Give Em Enough Rope* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1987) 128f.

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid. 168.

Re-aestheticizing the word, for Andrews, “means taking it out of its familiar institutional contexts,” instead of letting it be “sublated,” thus “opening up the capacity of the reader.” Emphasizing that “upholding the particularity, of the word, of language [...] is a kind of aestheticizing in the classical sense, [...] instead of letting it be imprinted or interpellated by literary institutions,” Andrews uses the Althusserian concept of interpellation to account for the political value of aesthetics, while his faith in the possibility of aesthetic distancing and counter-interpellation would align him more closely with Rancière’s thinking:

I think of Althusser, who was interesting to me in my political science theorizing, as theorizing what’s in the way of social change, you know, his whole notion of structural ... mobile, flexible structuring of capital. But here, if I’m talking about trying to protect the particularities of language and not let them be simply steamrollered by the institutional framework, that steamrolling is close to what Althusser is talking about as interpellation. The hailing process [...] is what “re-aestheticizing” works against.<sup>314</sup>

“Context,” observes Andrews, “robs words of their contingencies and encourages them to operate as transparencies.”<sup>315</sup> By withholding context then, the writing invokes the reader herself as context: it moves “towards an active contextualization of Production, in the other, in *you*.<sup>316</sup> This is already implied in Andrews’s idiosyncratic use of the term “self-referentiality.”<sup>317</sup> It explicitly points beyond a formal characteristic of literary discourse to the role of the reader – the self – who is supposed to become fully aware of language as content and event, and whose assumed tendency to be ‘carried away’ by means of reference and a naïve faith in the illusionary transparency of language into a world of consumable fictions and commodities. Regarding such behavior to have an alienating effect on readers, Andrews, by contrast, uses defamiliarization and methods of re-aestheticizing language to expedite a decidedly social and constructivist imagination, which returns us to McCaffery’s assertion of a particular political value in language-centered writing’s capacity to emphasize “the processual, non-commodity nature” of the word, and of language, which will be discussed in what follows.

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<sup>314</sup> Appendix i, 229.

<sup>315</sup> Bruce Andrews, “Interview Project Interview (With Marjorie Perloff),” *Paradise & Method, Poetics & Praxis* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996) 89.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Andrews 1973, n. pag.

## II.1.2 Andrews and the Politics of ‘L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E’: A Critical-Theoretical Discussion

What characterizes so-called “Language Poetry” in general – notwithstanding critical differences in the theoretical frameworks and writing practice of poets like Andrews, Bernstein, Steve McCaffery, Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, and others, is that all of its practitioners in some way or another apply the notion of commodity fetishism to conventional descriptive and narrative forms of writing where words, as Andrews and Bernstein assert,

cease to be valued for what they are themselves but only for their properties as instrumentalities leading us to a world outside or beyond them, so that words – language – disappear, become transparent, leaving the picture of a physical world the reader can then consume as if it were a commodity. This view of the role and historical functions of literature relates closely to our analysis of the capitalist social order as a whole and of the place that alternative forms of writing and reading might occupy in its transformation. It is our sense that the project of poetry does not involve turning language into a commodity for consumption; instead, it involves repossessing the sign through close attention to, and active participation in, its production.<sup>318</sup>

There is a pronounced emphasis on “writing as action; reading as action [...] a particular reading, an enactment, a co-Production.”<sup>319</sup> Andrews envisions a writing practice and a mode of reading in which the text reads the reader as much as the reader reads the text. In his 1977 essay “Text and Context,” Andrews, at his most poststructuralist, prizes “Transference. *Différance*. A carnival of ciphers,” pointing out the value of fragmentation, which “doesn’t banish the references *embodied* in individual words; merely – they are not placed in a *series*, in grammar, in a row on a shelf.” While such an emphasis on the value of fragmentation, or radical parataxis, brings to mind (early) Romantic precursors like Blake, Hölderlin, or Whitman, and most of early modernism’s paratactic poetry, the impact of French contemporary critical theory here becomes readily apparent in Andrews’s notion of “a more playful anarchy, a Möbius free-for-all [since] texts are themselves *signifieds*, not mere signifiers. TEXT: it requires no hermeneutics for it is itself one – of itself.”<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, “Repossessing the Word,” *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984) x.

<sup>319</sup> Bruce Andrews, “Text and Context,” *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984) 35.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid. 34.

Framing language writing as a self-consciously socialist project, as radical praxis, language writers like Andrews had recourse to a growing number of increasingly well-established critical theories both Marxist and poststructuralist, and a host of critical concepts, from the Marxian “language is practical consciousness” through Volosinov’s insight that the “sign becomes an arena of the class struggle,” with the ruling class striving “to impart a supraclass, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgments which occurs in it, to make the sign uniaccentual,” to Marcuse’s notion of “linguistic therapy,” Lyotard’s “*differance*,” Deleuzian “deterritorialization,” to name only a few.<sup>321</sup> While this list is certainly incomplete and impossible to complete in any meaningful way here, it is useful to highlight some of the more obvious connections between Andrews’s work and (post-)Situationist critical theory and avant-garde praxis. Consider another excerpt from “Text and Context:”

Altering textual roles might bring us closer to altering the larger social roles of which textual ones are a feature. READING: not the glazed gaze of the consumer, but the careful attention of a producer, or co-producer. The transformer. (capacitors? resistors?) Full of care. It’s not a product that is produce, but a production, an event, a praxis, a model for future practice. The domination of nature can find a critique here as well – not in abstinence. [...] A semantic atmosphere, or milieu, rather than the possessive individualism of reference. [...] Such a work has a utopian force only begun to be revealed.<sup>322</sup>

It may be useful to here to juxtapose Andrews’s ideas with those of Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, the Situationist theorists who in 1963 wrote:

The problem of language is at the center of every struggle for the abolition or preservation of today’s alienation; it is inseparable from the whole field of these struggles. We live in language as in polluted air. Contrary to what men of wit assume, words do not play. Nor do they make love, as Breton thought, except in dreams. Words work on behalf of the ruling organisation of life. Yet nevertheless they have not become automatons; to the misfortune of the theorists of information, words themselves are not “informationist”; through them, forces are expressed that may frustrate

<sup>321</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970) 51; V. N. Volosinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 23f; Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969) 8; Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, ed. G. Abbeele (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “What is a Minor Literature?,” trans. Robert Brinkley, *Mississippi Review* 11:3 (Winter/Spring 1983) 13-33, 16ff.

<sup>322</sup> Andrews 1984, 36.

calculations. Words coexist with power in a relationship similar to that which proletarians (in the classical as well as the modern meaning of this term) may maintain with power. Employed almost all the time, used full-time for their maximum sense and nonsense, they remain in some ways radically foreign.<sup>323</sup>

References to Situationist critique in “Text and Context” abound: “a spatial interaction,” “our gifts, its physical integrity,” “without the mediation of obedience,” “the *orders* of reference,” “representation is ownership,” “counter-commodification: a barbaric, if politically apt term,” “presentations of the present” – as do recognizably Freudo-Marxist (Marcusean) terms such as “polymorphous play,” “genital organization”, “castration complex,” “surplus repression” and “ego armor.”<sup>324</sup>

Language writing is thus effectively marshaled as an oppositional (utopian) project and thus makes “its entry into the world,” to use Barrett Watten’s formulation, “in a political way.”<sup>325</sup> Whereas commodification requires “clear signposts,” as Andrews notes, “language work resembles a creation of a community and of a world-view by a once-divided-but-now-refused Reader and Writer” – a creation which he sees as non-instrumental. Rather, it is “immanent, and in plain sight (and plain song, moving along a surface with all the complications of a charter or a town-meeting.”<sup>326</sup> Perfectly in line with the avant-garde dream of art as a model for community, and a community yet to come, Andrews links its “carnival atmosphere” to “workers’ control” and “self-management.”<sup>327</sup> The essay ends on a blatantly utopian note, hinting at the possibility of anarcho-communism – the telos of avant-garde aesthetic metapolitics.

The community which is unified, self contained, mercantilistic, unwilling to break down into spheres – resisting the division of labor (and hierarchy) that comes with literacy. Is this an

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<sup>323</sup> Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, “Editorial Notes: All the King’s Men,” *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. and trans. Tom McDonough (Boston: MIT, 2002) 153. Originally published in *Internationale Situationniste* 8 (January 1963) 29-33.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Barret Watten, “The Conduit of Communication in Everyday Life,” *Ariel* 8, ed. Rod Smith (Washington: Edge, 1995): 32-38, 32.

<sup>326</sup> Andrews 1984, 35.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid. It should be noted that Andrews’s later work is more explicitly concerned with negative aspects of power standing in the way of progressive social transformation. For instance, the internalization of social coercion and “surplus repression” (Marcuse) by subjects themselves as developed in the work of Adorno, Althusser, and Foucault, particularly, the latter’s concept of (neoliberal) “governmentality,” cf. esp. Michel Foucault, *Knowledge/Power: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon, et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1980) 55-62, and Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 260-271, 283.

incestual nostalgia for illiteracy? A polymorphous lettrism, a movement into script, grapheme, syllable, cipher, glyph, gloss, corpus? Readers embody texts. Physical language.<sup>328</sup>

Early language writing's relationship with Situationism, particularly through writers like McCaffery and Andrews, has largely gone under-theorized. However, an advance in that direction has recently been made by Tim Kreiner who systematically explores the conception of the poem – emerging in the mid-1970s in the US – as

[...] a textual environment through which a reader moves freely by constructing temporary and contextually specific meanings from its parts (sounds, words, lines, sentences) as analogous to the S[ituationalist] I[nternationale]'s dream of a permanent revolution in the cityscape (as context providing the contents of daily experience).<sup>329</sup>

Against the backdrop of the failures of 1968 and the growing political despair attending the escalation of the Vietnam War, and in the context of “minimal employment and low cost of living that was the late 1970s” in San Francisco as well as New York’s Lower East and Upper West Side, Kreiner ponders “the collective and utopian nature of that project,” and understands it as “a signal (but partial) instance of the effort to wed Marxist political praxis with post-structuralist textual agency.” Its fusion of critique and aesthetic practice, “via the development of conceptual and aesthetic technologies that shifted poetics from writerly concerns with textual production to readerly concerns with contextual production,” according to Kreiner, “made possible an imaginative instantiation of the political desires which the SI momentarily organized, at a moment when possibilities for their materialization were coming to seem everywhere foreclosed.”<sup>330</sup>

While Kreiner’s retrospective analysis is very much to the point, the direct alignment of linguistic reference with the notion of commodity fetishism popularized by the ‘language school’ – by way of Debordian *Kulturkritik* and neostructuralist Marxism – is indeed problematic and has been critiqued by a growing number of scholars and critics, including Marxist theorists like Jameson, Eagleton, and others. Rod Mengham, for instance, whose criticism of language writing is reminiscent of Rancière’s rejection of (post-)Situationist

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<sup>328</sup> Ibid. 38.

<sup>329</sup> Tim Kreiner, “The Dérive, the 27th Letter of the Alphabet, Poetics and Politics in Language Poetry and the Situationist International,” paper presented at “The Poetry of the 1970s” (NPF Conference, 2008), available through <http://vectors.usc.edu/thoughtmesh/publish/189.php> (July 14, 2011).

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

critical theory and art has noted that the equation of reference to the commodity fetish is “too neat and too constricting to let the poetry do very much work of its own.” For Mengham,

[it] reduces the act of writing to a blind act of sabotage repeated an infinite number of times, so that, although the resulting text seems difficult at first, its probable effect is much simpler than the interlocking series of relations it is trying to replace. The ‘Language’ writers are so fascinated by the conceptual framework it is their task to critique that they find it hard to free their thought from its shadow.<sup>331</sup>

Realizing, as they write in 1984, that “confusion about the nature of this exploration flourishes,” Andrews and Bernstein, in a less “hifalutin”<sup>332</sup> style of theorizing than that which characterizes many of the essays and manifesto-like statements of poetics and critical theory in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, state that “the idea”

that writing should (or *could*) be stripped of reference is as bothersome and confusing as the assumption that the primary function of words is to refer, one-on-one, to an already constituted world of “things.” Rather, reference, like the body itself, is one of the horizons of language, whose value is to be found in the writing (the world) before which we find ourselves at any moment. [The point is] the multiple powers and scope of reference (denotative, connotative, associational), not writers’ refusal or fear of it.<sup>333</sup>

Thinking in terms of dissensus, the question arises in what ways such a practice may affect a given “partition/distribution of sensible,” for instance, by revealing its contingency through alternative modes of reading and making meaning which rely on aesthetic modes of experience to open up a liminal space of political potentiality. Andrews’s emphasis on reader activity (“bring your own contexts;” “reading as action;” “co-creators”)<sup>334</sup> and concern with the reification of language (“commodities are sold, productions are forgotten”)<sup>335</sup>, however, also brings to mind Rancière’s egalitarian critique of avant-garde models (Artaudian, Brechtian, Debordian, and post-Situationist) of audience or reader ‘activation’ by any means, as it were, which has been discussed at length in chapter I.9. Rancière problematizes such models on the basis that they presuppose a socially passive spectator, or reader, and construe

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<sup>331</sup> Rod Mengham, “Language Writing,” *Textual Practice* 3:1 (Spring 1989): 114-23, 116.

<sup>332</sup> The term is used by Andrews himself, cf. Appendix i, 220.

<sup>333</sup> Andrews and Bernstein 1984, ixf.

<sup>334</sup> Andrews 1984, 33, 35.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid. 32, 35.

her mode of seeing, reading, or listening as passive and naïve – duped by the spectacle, “mediations of obedience,” and “the *orders* of reference.”<sup>336</sup>

To dismiss the fantasies of the word made flesh and the spectator rendered active, to know that words are merely words and spectacles merely spectacles, can help us arrive at a better understanding of how words and images, stories and performances, can change something of the world we live in.<sup>337</sup>

Rancière’s is a necessary challenge to the language school’s notion of a reader-centered poetics as a kind of writing which ‘allows’ the reader to become the text’s co-producer – as if the reader needed allowance, in the first place, or lacks the capacity of thinking beyond a more conservative text’s – say, a Robert Frost poem’s – narrative proposition.

While this criticism is not without its warrant and points to some of the limitations resulting from a wholesale rejection of narrative forms, it is important to note that Andrews’s politicized writing practice accords specific value to individual readers’ aesthetic experiences and that his anarcho-communist vision is twice removed from Plato’s archi-ethical notion of the ideal community, which is certainly reliant on the idea of division, not only of labor, but of human kinds. Language writing’s “dissensual operation” consist precisely in revealing the contingency of the police order’s *partage du sensible* by showing that, to use Rancière’s terms, “every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification.”<sup>338</sup> Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world, which in Andrews’s non-vanguardist political framework is each of us. In such a way, the kind of “connective reading” promoted by Andrews, as Juliana Spahr puts it in her study of contemporary avant-garde poetics, *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*,<sup>339</sup> contributes to a collective understanding of emancipation as “the collectivization of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus.”<sup>340</sup>

This will become more obvious when looking at Andrews’s later writing and performance practice, as the following chapter does. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s,

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Rancière 2009b, 23.

<sup>338</sup> Rancière 2009b, 48f.

<sup>339</sup> Cf. Juliana Spahr, *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 2001) 51ff.

<sup>340</sup> Rancière 2009b, 49.

Andrews's work takes a more explicitly Brechtian approach towards a fully-fledged political modernism, or rather, a neo-Brechtian approach, as Brechtian theory and praxis are filtered through the critical semiology of Roland Barthes and neo-structuralist Marxism. What follows is an analysis of Andrews's "discursive turn" in which the focus of the writing shifts from production – of meaning, of desire, etc. – to editing, to a more phrase-based experimentation with the 'raw materials' of social language – which allows for a more decidedly social address – Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* and the aesthetico-semiotic politics of collage, montage, and radical parataxis.

## II.2 The Poet as Editor as Reader: Andrews's 'Discursive Turn' and the Aesthetico-Semiotic Politics of Montage & Critical Defamiliarization

### II.2.1 Montage, Reading/Writing, and Althusserian Articulation: Centrifugal Writing and the Challenge of Political Rearticulation

If we want to question the continuing viability of Modernism, to ask what use we can make of its heritage in our contemporary poetics, we notice right away its commitment to distancing and reflexivity, to artifice and newness. We also notice an aestheticizing that removes its texts from any political embrace, and a frequent worship of the lyric self-centered expressive subject (one of the most antisocial impulses in the modernist pantheon). Here, Bertolt Brecht's V-Effect, and the epic theater it serves, stands for a social modernism, to visibly connect what happens on stage (or on the page) to the forms of making sense that operate within society (or class struggle) at large.<sup>341</sup>

Editing is the reading moment. // Reading constructs. / And it does so by combating the obvious at all levels — / in order to maximize openness at every level: / acoustics, 'looks', page layout and design, authorship, genre, grammar. // The normal starts to seem precarious, contingent, even exceptional. // I want something that holds together that's not smooth. // Something that would agitate or reinscribe the social raw materials of agency, of subjects, of subject positions, of persons, of discourse — / and make them the building blocks of whatever it constructs. // An Informalism. Of connections. / The connectionism is a Surprise Machine. / It works by ... / MULTIMPLICATION.<sup>342</sup>

These two statements of critical poetics, both published in 2001, basically contain, in a nutshell, the key concepts of Andrews's thinking, from the late 1970s into the present, about the politics of poetic form and the question of political subjectivity as it poses itself to contemporary avant-garde praxis. Beginning with such texts as "Swaps Ego," composed in 1978 and published in *Give Em Enough Rope* (1987),<sup>343</sup> Andrews started to radically recontextualize and collage in various ways – by means of montage, juxtaposition, and radical parataxis on the word, phrase, sentence, and overall compositional levels – specialized vocabularies from a variety of heterogeneous sources such as scientific journals and popular magazines. Andrews uses these materials to generate (subjectively manipulated, and thus intentional rather than aleatory) collisions between heterogenous elements and vocabularies

<sup>341</sup> Bruce Andrews, "Brechtian V-Effect Updated: Implications for Poetic Praxis," *Crayon 3* (New York: Duration, 2001a) n. pag.

<sup>342</sup> Andrews 2001b, n. pag.

<sup>343</sup> Bruce Andrews, *Give Em Enough Rope* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1987).

from such diverse discourses as real politics, linguistics, finance, critical theory, art history, (popular) music, and what appears to be names drawn from a sporting paper such as *The Daily Racing Form*. In the resultant mesh of language, themes only latent in the source texts emerge in a text animated by the tension between atomized words and the pull of an emergent syntax. The result is defamiliarizing to such an extent that only after scanning the page visually for anything familiar, one can slowly begin to actually read the text.

Consider, for instance, the following two pages from “Swaps Ego.”

Notation Malign My Pass Soup Babu  
 Dark Your Side Pretense Chili Con Shoot Little Luke  
 Spin Lig Threshold Kind And It Extent Of Eyes Usable  
 Aloud Iron Velvet Intentionally Imperial Bomb It's WhamBam  
 Esperons Fought Waiting Dominion Rebounding Clavicular  
 Rose Questions Flies Stocking Red Pencil Going Motions  
 Helix No Bias Obliterator Gown Here Here Place Planes Out  
 Clair-voyant Thou Fool Amber Solo Moxie Copper Too  
 1. Almost Skin Arpeggio Populist Natal Day  
 2. Logical Difference Not Burned Out Rollercoaster Paper  
     Cheapers Highness Sufficient Steel Lackland Tribunal  
     To Do  
     Instead Uncle Blabby French Baffle Tribe  
     Ace's Exist Vowed Intent Know No Bounds  
     Think You Are Lionheart Centrifugal Squalling Spud Bug  
     Pampsy YuflPrs Distinctive Markov Night Bomber Penny  
     Anterior Strings Business Conkers Mood Thirteen  
     All The Angles Take To Arms' Serious Talk Thinking Someone  
     Else  
     Can Gun Optimum Pitch As Posterior Crico-Arytenoid Muscles  
     Grandfatherless However Octane Height Of Tongue Room  
     Restressing Isinglass Enchantment  
     Place Like Knee Delay Clothes Quick Agreement "Explosives"  
     Skew Eight Rapid Rabbit Dominion Velvet Exactly Duplicate  
     Incorrigible Go Marching Hypotenuse Radio Guillotine  
     Merle Necessary Hyphen Grey Royalty Spores Anon  
     Name Creme Wave Shareholder At Us Tupelo Bibs  
     Lota Tacit Craze About Arrangement Says So Aphasia

Never Mean A World Chest You Fancy Celebrating  
 Singavoy Margin Sucrose Thrust Terms Inquisitress  
 Up Stitch Fleet Air Built Stage Talk – Exceptions  
 Recalled Miss Call At Weights Univocal Wrist Test  
 Frequently I'll Do It Rumor Giving Person Bumps Hosiery  
 Principia Hung Outlook Eagle Diphthong Tux 'N' All  
 Amicus Curiae Murmuring Diffusion Altar Self-Embedded  
 Bolinas Oomaloom Pastry Wagon Molars  
 Distant Yep Yep Yep Slash Casual Lunacy The Hand  
     More Space Jigsaw Wing Flutter Lap  
 Find Claudia Orbis Yards Doesn't Clause Mammy  
 Panamusick Bore Out Social Lesion After Blockage  
 Dream Of Dreams Wit Legal Misger Bothering Tyranny Tea  
     Market  
 Dot The T. Plan Others Herbjudge Plea Do Excuses Nothing  
 Homonym Rose Gets Permission First Brisk In Theory  
 Was Ist Syntax Delicate Denasality  
 Restored Fore Glides School Crush Blue Blue Blue Suede  
 City Streets Sewing Manifesto Thinks The Keep On Thought  
 Warfare From Fruit Jar Proponent Zarky Teeth Yak Bob  
 Distinct Mentalist Picture Tube Bronchi Solid But Bemask  
     Sermonette  
 Draft Marked Copy Big Travel Air  
 Do The Stroll Problem Hoarse Perception Of In Brain  
 Noise Hypotenuse  
 Remark Had In Close Fortune World Tonight Devise  
 No One Redundant Falsetto Stomp And Go  
 Binary Spanking — Communism Safety Queen

**Fig. 6** from Bruce Andrews, *Give Em Enough Rope* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1987) 94f.

While all possible relations between elements on this page are clearly overdetermined, some of the lines may resonate more strongly and with more semantic charge than others, and thus capture the reader’s attention. This may be due either to their syntactic possibilities, their denotative and connotative charge, aesthetic properties such as sound and texture as well as all of the these elements combined – for instance in such striking neologistic compounds as “Noise Hyoptenuse,” “Radio Guillotine,” “Skin Arpeggio” or “Binary Spanking,” the latter being juxtaposed with “Communism Safety Queen.” Not dissimilar in technique to Allen

Ginsberg's famous "hydrogen jukebox,"<sup>344</sup> the social, political, and psychological "multimplications" of these compounds and juxtapositions certainly challenge conventional explication as context is generally withheld, although 'technology and the body,' 'history and politics' come to mind as contextual fields.

Andrews uses this technique a lot, despite his rejection of Ginsbergian spiritual politics, which occasionally surfaces in different parts of *Give Em Enough Rope*, for instance in such phrases as "Supposedly beatific but really self-indulgent '60s crap," or "And Chinamen would sing fist-pounding in them bottom / who cauterize imagining for reasons test sentimental / social spoilation / really tear up glamorous precursors' buttresuscitation squads."<sup>345</sup> However, since there is no identifiable speaker, or lyric voice, the illocution of these statements remains fully ambiguous, and the racist, chauvinist, homophobic tone of the latter passage may as well present (just another) social stereotype. More specifically suggestive in political terms then are lines such as "Communism Were The Days," which may be read as a critique of "post-ideological" thinking but also as critique of contemporary Communists' haloed nostalgia, or "American History Dubbed in Dictation Dictation Dictation,"<sup>346</sup> which performatively enacts (by emphasizing the force and effect of repetition) the problems of historiography as well as the canonizing and hegemonizing of national history in the interest of capital and power. The line can also be read as a reference to Ginsberg's "who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars,"<sup>347</sup> but the technique is 'politicized,' as it were, put to explicitly critical use.

Many elements here can be said to be self-referential in the usual literary sense of referring back to the text itself – to its own poetics (*poiesis*), on a meta-level – while at the same being "self-reflexive" in Andrews's sense of referring back to the readerly subject as context – the social context of the reading experience: "Lota Tacit Craze About Arrangement Says So Aphasia [an impairment of language ability]," "Think You Are Lionheart Centrifugal Spud Bug" (with "centrifugal" alluding to the contextualizing character of the reading experience, the above mentioned 'opening out into the social'), "One Little Word Almost Like A Prognostic Of Garment," a reference to inter-textuality in its broadest, Kristevan or Derridean, sense, "Was Ist Syntax Delicate Denasality," which reads like a reference to the limitations and social mannerism of normative grammar, and even phonetic literary allusions, "Homonym Rose Gets Permission First Brisk In Theory" – a reference to Gertrude Stein's

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<sup>344</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956) 15.

<sup>345</sup> Andrews 1987, 32, 8.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid. 91.

<sup>347</sup> Ginsberg, 1956, 12.

iconoclastic poetics and its theoretical significance. But what happens if we do not read according to the usual protocols of reading – upper left to lower right by way of decoding line by line – at all. Vertical reading may produce ‘lines’ like “Muscles Room ‘Explosive’ Duplicate Guillotine Anon Bibs Aphasia,” which can be equally suggestive and illustrates what Dworkin refers to as “the tension between atomized words and the pull of an emergent syntax.”<sup>348</sup>

A more conventional reading, of course, may begin with the title of the poem: “Swaps Ego” seems to refer, as George Hartley notes, to Émile Benveniste’s notion of the “shifter,” i.e. the pronoun slot which is filled by any number of subjects.<sup>349</sup> As Benveniste has demonstrated at length, the “I” in English holds the primary subject position, the reference of which changes each time a new subject speaks or writes. Ironically, the pronoun which seems to ground each individual’s identity refers to an infinite possible number of *other* subjects in other contexts. It is in this sense that the “I” “swaps ego[s].” Andrews’s title, then, as Hartley points out, also serves as a structural and phonetic pun that extends into a kind of Althusserian analogue to a conception of society as structural totality:

But the “I” as pronoun ties in with another theme of the poem, the odyssey of the phoneme, especially those phonemes that are also words in themselves, such as A or I or, in the perverse play of this poem, U (you). The first five words of the poem—“Double You Double You See” [91] —are homophonic plays on the letters W, W, and C, which when combined (“Triple Three Triple Three Triple”) may or may not form the aggregate structures called morphemes. Andrews thus focusses on the way minimal units can be joined to produce meaning; the key concept in this process is articulation: “Accidents Culmination Drift Toward Articulation Minister” [92]. What we have is an analogue to a conception of society as a totality—not as some homogeneous entity but as the constellation of units whose cohesion is due their specific articulation, their arrangement in relation to one another.<sup>350</sup>

Accordingly, the opening lines of “Swaps Ego” read:

Double You Double You See Triple Three Triple Three Triple  
Make Eyes Brown Blue Morpheme Of Male Vulnerability<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Dworkin 2001, 14.

<sup>349</sup> Cf. George Hartley, “Context Needs a Contest: Poetic Economy and Bruce Andrews’s *Give Em Enough Rope*,” *Rethinking Marxism* 5:4 (Winter 1992): 89–113, 103.

<sup>350</sup> Hartley 1992, 103f.

<sup>351</sup> Andrews 1987, 91.

Before moving on, it may be conducive to briefly review some of Althusser's central concepts. In Althusserian theory the attention to the "I" as subject position and to its position as phoneme/morpheme are related in the sense that the subject's position in society results from the "articulation" of ideologically defined subject positions in that particular social formation ("Althusserian categories get up & dance like a zombie jamboree"<sup>352</sup>). Each subject position, in Hartley's words, "works something like the phoneme in its structuration into morphemes and of the morphemes themselves into complex words and sentences."<sup>353</sup> The subject is thus written into the social syntax of a given totality. What interests Andrews, however, "is the possibility of movement and counterarticulation *from those points*; in other words, once we recognize our position within society, how free are we to change positions or to alter the given ideological charge of that spot?" For Hartley, "this is a question, then, of class struggle," and thus of political subjectivity. At work in the poem, then, is an attempt to foreground the possibility of rearticulating its elements:

Ways Of Obtaining Film Diphthong  
Reminding Enough Sudden Frenzy Arc Blissful  
Various Core States Capitalism Of Themselves  
Broken Tempo And Vocal Abuse<sup>354</sup>

Andrews himself theorizes such "rearticulation" in his 1990 essay "Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis" (originally a contribution to the *Politics of Poetic Form* series at the New School for Social Research) with implicit references to both Althusser and Foucault, as follows:

By eliciting praxis—to carry out language's demand for prescriptions; for the Anti-Obvious. By actively pressing the 'network of differentials' in the writing itself. How to disclose & unclothe the social world: moving outward through these broader & broader layers & concentric circles of intelligibility. By a writing that counter-occludes, or counter-disguises; that politicizes by repositioning its involvement in, its intersection with, a nexus of historical relations – that is contingent social relations, an edifice of power – which otherwise 'ceaselessly governs' it.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid. 92.

<sup>353</sup> Hartley 1992, 104.

<sup>354</sup> Andrews 1987, 96.

<sup>355</sup> Andrews 1990, 28f.

The main political thrust of much of Andrews's writing resides in its systematic attempt to “show the *possibilities* of sense & meaning being constructed; to foreground the limits of the possible,” and thus to create what he calls “impossibility.”<sup>356</sup> Against the background of Rancière’s egalitarian critique of politicized avant-garde practices which create (what they think of as the appropriate kind of) distance only in order to abolish it in communal action, it seems worth emphasizing that Andrews’s model, while entertaining a critical and thus prescriptive model, values precisely that distance which allows for critique and egalitarian reader/writer exchange without wanting to abolish it: “For the only immediacy possible is an immediacy of address, of readers ‘talking back,’ where the distances writing creates appear as hospitality.”<sup>357</sup>

For Andrews, in the first place, Althusserian and Foucauldian theoretical concepts provide a means of thinking about “what’s in the way of progressive social change,” and what forecloses politics.<sup>358</sup> In fact, it seems that Andrews’s theoretical framework, while retaining a strong neo-Marxists emphasis on ideology critique, resonates strongly with Rancière’s *partage du sensible* and the concepts of consensus and dissensus:

The play of language as action may suggests an infinity, an essential openness; but closure does occur outside it – in *settled frameworks of perception & cognition & feeling* [my emphasis]. Poetic work can take on that establishment: of a paradigm of discourse & ideology, of meaningfulness which is organized socially, or socially coded, just like a sign: as a social body of what is unsaid, which carries (like a membrane) all that is said – the establishment’s strategic project of *already appropriating sense & already making use of it* [my emphasis].<sup>359</sup>

A text like “Swaps Ego” opens out into the social not despite but because of its relative opacity. The “surface” of the page, to use Rancière’s terminology, which in the “aesthetic regime of art” (and literature) is always already an “interface,” is not allowed to become ‘purely’ interface, as it were, as the writing solicits a socially contextualizing ‘looking at’ rather than a ‘looking through’ approach, while retaining the basic interface function that allows for extremely heterogenous elements to occupy the page in the first place. In Andrews’s writing the medium can be felt (it is given aesthetic presence) and thus allows the text “to speak twice over,” as Rancière puts it, on behalf of both its readability and

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>358</sup> Appendix i, 229.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid. 30.

unreadability. In this way it is reliant on the aesthetic conception of art in the Rancièrean sense. This seems all the more important to note as Andrews's work is frequently considered "anti-literary" and "anti-aesthetic" – which makes little or no sense unless one understands aesthetics strictly with Baumgarten as a science of natural or artistic (harmonious) beauty.<sup>360</sup> For Kant and Schiller, as Rancière reminds his readers forcefully, the aesthetic is not confined to the art of the beautiful.

Thinking in terms of art as social institution, by contrast, it is obvious that Andrews is perfectly aware that his work is being identified as "literature," as "art." References to the institution of art, to the difficulties of avant-gardism, and to the 'artworld,' frequently appear throughout his work: "Aesthetics pension comes first," "Art & the struggle for socialism," "These words are not in the vocabulary of America's working class, *therefore*," "Why don't it like artists who never give a thought to world capitalism?," "So, it's what art, just formalist theory?," "The tendency in art towards party," "that sounds o.k., social modernism," or "Politics & art are two different things."<sup>361</sup> These references, however, are highly ambiguous and polyvalent, complicated by grammar, phonetic play, and through juxtaposition with heterogeneous textual material. "The tendency in art towards party," for instance, may be read as a reference to the New York happening scene, to parties and vernissages, to Walter Benjamin's notion of a work's "literary tendency" as its "political tendency," in "The Author as Producer,"<sup>362</sup> and the historical association of avant-gardism with political vanguardism, i.e. '*the party*.' The phrase "Art & the struggle for socialism," besides raising the question if "&" is to be understood as inclusive or exclusive logical operator here, is juxtaposed with "social inequality in Yugoslavia, slips of the Freudians – Some kind of wild coconut ding-a-ling, delicious, the Eurocommunist mirage – Capitalist expansion in the USA," effecting a kind of semantic explosion/implosion.<sup>363</sup> While it is, of course, possible to identify thematic concerns here – the failures of (neo-liberal) capitalism and real-existing socialism as well as ludicrous efforts of ideologues to present these as 'perfect systems,' for instance, and how this might relate in turn to art as social praxis – questions of authorial intent and literary interpretation appear equally misguided. In a decidedly Brechtian manner, the text solicits a social and political interpretation of the state of the world rather than of the literary artefact.

Consider one more example on the subject of art as social institution versus art as social

<sup>360</sup> Cf. Alexander G. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica – Ästhetik: Lateinisch-deutsche Ausgabe*, ed. Constanze Peres (Paderborn: Fink, 2007).

<sup>361</sup> Andrews 1987, 52, 166; Andrews 1992, 308, 96, 133; Andrews 1995, 10.

<sup>362</sup> Benjamin 1970, 83f.

<sup>363</sup> Andrews 1987, 166.

praxis. The following is the opening line of a prose-poem, from the book-length sequence *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*, which opens as follows:

I want educated oxen; hey, fuckhead, this is art<sup>364</sup>

The line, it seems, works by juxtaposition and a kind of shock tactic. And the ‘shock’ is threefold: First, it is a *non sequitur* and is therefore unexpected; second, it immediately degrades anyone who reads or hears the poem; and third, as Eric Stroshane notes, “it declares (correctly) that this defamatory act ‘is art’ – that is: the highest form of cultural aesthetic achievement is pointing out that you are a ‘fuckhead.’” For Stroshane, “this heralds a questioning of the conventions of definition, of art, of insult, and of oxen,” and probably of education, too. While it may, of course, be perfectly possible to simply ignore the intended perlocutionary effect of the ‘utterance,’ which cannot be guaranteed without external force and is easily neutralized in writing, the line serves as a vivid illustration of Althusser’s notion of “interpellation.” Moreover, it tests reader’s sensibilities and raises questions about our understanding of culture at large.

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<sup>364</sup> Andrews 1992, 153.

## II.2.2 “‘Reagan-Era Word Bombing’ to Stir the Beehive:” Dissensus & Neo-Brechtian Method in *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*

With the 1980s, paralleling the U.S.’s political shift to the neo-conservative right and the beginning of the Reagan-Bush Eras<sup>365</sup> (and the so-called “culture wars”), the units of composition in Andrews’s poems began to include larger, more syntactically coherent units and to incorporate the kinds of confrontational samples of social discourse which would characterize *Give Em Enough Rope, I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*, *Divestiture A*, and some of his most recent writing. In these works, as will be shown in what follows, Andrews’s neo-Brechtian stance and adaptation of the V-Effect to post-avant-garde aesthetic politics becomes more apparent, and more pronounced. The satirized and ‘ventriloquizing’ transcriptions of public speech and chunks of social discourse found in these works initially appear more accessible than the earlier non-lexical work. Yet the writing, as Dworkin notes, “is still significantly anasemantic.”<sup>366</sup> While the content, or locution, of these de- and recontextualized phrases is frequently provocative and sometimes extremely offensive, the emphasis is less on the possible illocutionary meaning and particular content of the phrases themselves, than on its potential “perlocutionary force”<sup>367</sup> and the social work undertaken by such language: “the disjunctive and irreconcilable contexts of the phrases underscores the sorts of social and psychological constructions language enables, enacts, structures”<sup>368</sup> – they create, as Brian Kim Stefans notes, “a drama of sorts, though with no protagonist.”<sup>369</sup> Andrews’s writing works toward increasing the performativity of the text in order to project social antagonisms and render visible what Williams calls “structures of feeling.”<sup>370</sup>

This turn, “from the micro-text level” of the sign towards the “macro-text level” of discourse, was accompanied by significant changes in Andrews’s compositional process as

<sup>365</sup> As Louis Cabri notes in a recent article, “This ‘social’ turn in Andrews’s work occurs just when so-called Reaganomics begins its own ‘turn’ – turnover, really – of U.S. domestic policy-involvement with social questions – into the hands of corporations and the religious right. [...] *Shut Up* forms part of a larger struggle, carried on discursively as well, against privatizing and ‘nuclearizing’ social consciousness” (Louis Cabri, “Mere Essay at Bruce Andrews’s ‘Social’,” *Jacket* 2 (May 2003) <http://jacketmagazine.com/22/and-cabri.html> (June 4, 2011).

<sup>366</sup> Dworkin 2001, 14.

<sup>367</sup> Cf. John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (New York: Harvard UP, 1975) 94-120.

<sup>368</sup> Dworkin 2001, 14f.

<sup>369</sup> Brian Kim Stefans, “Bruce Andrews’s *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*, Sun & Moon Press, 1992.” *St. Mark’s Poetry Project Newsletter* (December 1993), available through <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/about/stefans.html> (July 2011).

<sup>370</sup> Williams 1977, 128.

well. Routinely jotting down individual words, short phrases, and constellations of words on small, regular-sized (8,5/11") pieces of paper which he stores in boxes, Andrews assembles a considerable amount of socially charged linguistic "raw material" which is ceded from its original contexts and only later, i.e. up to several years later, is organized into larger structures. With that montage technique, the emphasis in writing shifts from production to editing. Conceiving of writing as editing, then, and of editing as coming closest to "the reading moment," Andrews intentionally montages his text with an eye toward, and a fine ear for, various kinds of antagonism, collision, and contradiction. Consider the following sequence from *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*, which is a tour de force of 100 prose poems of roughly 600 hundred words each; the poems are chronologically ordered and titled according to their opening phrases, which can be understood as a comment on social arbitrariness and the totality of social relations. In order to at least 'hint' at what an actual reading experience of such a work may be like, I will quote one such poem, "AM I ALIVE?" in its entirety:

"Am I alive?" fucks Freud to death; sorry, wrong culture —  
who hug a dome if such bigotry crow with infantile personali-  
ties. Computer talk  
good & evil pipes cut to spit showdown in diagonal's neo-  
book tooth-fairy wags, naught salvation, I have no ices. Certif-  
icate doldrums  
orlon only! Wet the root retool the fatuous mainstream: will  
individualism & self-consciousness ever be redeemed — by  
society?, Molotov cocktailing the saliva. Crucifix belongs to  
contradiction. Punny gaffe could be forced — the middle class  
has no leaders & is thus controlled all the more effectively.  
Emotion prolonged is mood  
got his manhood blown off. I recognize a flop when it invades  
the bodies of others.... Ain't it good – stick up here –  
stink my nurture; those churches stay in business, wives  
explain husbands as malicious unites tramp crepe wiggle fails  
the mother tongue; courtesy confines hemorrhages are the  
abusing the witnesses. Jollies  
redeem the world, if this is your destiny; sit home & plans to  
flack the flute, spin my own panties, my wound never to be  
healed needles defrost, spine on radio icing of bipartisanship  
sung ('we're in the sinuses now!'). Bags of lime block our  
enlightenment exhausts convention for good reason.  
Yankee as mannerist peepholes, grail reduced to postcard-

sized replicas of mid-west consumerism.  
Bride sap rubber nerve  
dross will sink; snack on permeability.

*El Boom*, honor boohoo beanpot of racial parochialism obituary by comparison; makeup hides the groin. Sky is failing, on the basis of accusations. I'm happy to have a little waste. Dames are dish down to go – Islamization by fastest breakfast sausage. Asthma stirs in – become dumb wildlife (the flicker effect) stiffed in the brutal enough returns to be Discounted ignition of the innocents:

Brazil has no astronauts; news – miscegenation of advertising solidly language repudiated in court. Gay bowels clouds throw out idea fatigues involved in controlling nuclear weapons to protect the vestiges of vegetable dignity. Thugathon – art these thanks work? Perplexed ham you? – language institutionalized theft, if someone can drop a bomb on your foolish, teach speech with a swizzle stick. White cronies facelift whites are like plague. Shoes go around – death sounds glib – hasidic sex – hood triangulates the sinus. Snafu. Mutt yawn to call kill your tickets. Synagogue of Satan unit sulks, so please do your part and buckle up. Pug white scarf so that cows grow a critic, good bush to you! Tony, do crabs have gills? – I hate American culture, it shouldn't have been allowed to develop: the green green grass of the bank ergonomics, I'm a sketchy ditch. Could hostile ice machines complain about happy purpose? Look mommy, my turds are formalist D.S.A. braindamage; clean my fuck up. I have never lied. Why do Jewish girls like their boys circumscribed? – Is Nehru correct about the gold-rush? Domino theory of your face excision of animal hearts as lay elders; wimps reposition their stilts. Bind the feet – drink your father's roulette, that Army recruitment posters; that's that. Building fans monk that look, reduce pain valet douching. They like everything 20% off. That was not my voice. Ball this deb platelet troubleshooter pretension person so full of budget set hostile pens to work.

Regrettable foster hormone parents

toys that can imagine white bread of whose life  
hate misunderstanding electricity atonement. Choir robes  
made out of tampon crow with shortsighted philosophy. It  
would be good to have framing devices; we sucked his body to  
purge our sin. Speed of fuss = surveil the beat. I failed the  
weight test & was banished to fiction.  
I'm up on the previous –  
self is no redeemer. Prorate lips fluke scum down on the drool,  
you're writing this down now, lest you should ever acquire  
knowledge.<sup>371</sup>

At first sight, the extraordinary range of cultural references, non sequiturs, and socially charged material in such writing may be considered an archetypical case of postmodern anti-subjectivity, schizophrenia, entropy – “Isn’t that the theory about entropy?”<sup>372</sup> – notwithstanding the writing’s neo-Marxist framework and unsettling ‘in-your-face’ quality, which has prompted such telling critical labels as “Reagan-era word bombing.”<sup>373</sup> Andrews’s method here, and the reading experience it provides, may involve what Deleuze and Guattari famously perceived as a “deterritorialization” of language in experimental modernist literature as well as a “disengag[ement] from familialism.” However, it can hardly be described adequately in terms of anti-oedipal “schizophrenia” and “desiring-production” alone, not to mention the ultimately apolitical transcendence of the political by “eminently psychotic and revolutionary means of escape.”<sup>374</sup>

Rather, Andrews’s method is self-consciously Brechtian in many ways, chief among which are the use of the social “*Gestus*”<sup>375</sup> instead of illusions of psychological depth (or lyric voice) and the significance of the readerly subject as the site of contestation. Instead of being

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<sup>371</sup> Bruce Andrews, *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1992) 15ff.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid. 115.

<sup>373</sup> The phrase is Rod Smith’s, cf. <http://www.aerialedge.com/aerial9.htm> (August 18, 2011).

<sup>374</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1983) 95, 133f.

<sup>375</sup> cf. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964). As defined by Brecht, “the social gest is the gest relevant to society, the gest that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances . . . about the entire structure of a society at a particular (transient) time” (104f.; 98). Ideally, for Brecht, the spectator “has again and again to make what we might call hypothetical adjustments to our structure, by mentally switching off the motive force of our society or by substituting others for them” (191). Such a method, then, “calls for a kind of resistance by the listener, and for his mobilization and redrafting as a producer” (32). It should also be noted that where Brecht used, and refashioned, for political purposes such popular forms as cabaret, folk music, kabuki, and the circus, Andrews takes up elements from such popular forms as stand-up comedy, punk rock, hip hop, and rap, mixing it – as already Brecht did – with nearly all available forms from the bourgeois pantheon of high culture and avant-garde techniques, which can be said, of course, to be characteristic of a specific kind of postmodernism more generally.

designed to “show off some internal psychology,” Andrews’s writing “highlights the socially customized lacework that exists between the characters (or the characterful words and phrases),” attempting with Brecht “to demonstrate a ‘sociological motivation and sociological characterization’ and measure them as they get physicalized in bearing and stance.”<sup>376</sup> It would be misleading to construe Andrews’s work as “a postmodern carnival of simulacra” which happily jettisons meaning and eventually applauds the “death of the subject.” Rather, it should be understood as a neo-Marxist critique of constitutive subjectivity, i.e. a critique of how ideology subjects us, or, in other words, the ideologically-functional discursive formation of the subject. Andrews’s writing in *Shut Up* is both an assault on the senses and a concerted attack on specific ways of making (social) sense. In this sense, it aspires to actively bring about what Rancière calls “a rupture between sense and sense” on the part of the reader.

Andrews’s neo-Brechtian adaptation of core-methods from the dialectical theatre to experimental writing, of course, involves a turn to discourse theory:

Discursive orders, the system of the sign, would both be worked over — as individual phrases (or potential phrases ghosted by individual words) are empowered to broadcast a social stance and attitude of their own. Tableau-like, framing at a standstill: to interrupt or objectify the separate units to set off the larger contradictions. Highlighting social gesture cuts against one modernist cliché: that of idealizing the author as a site of unique mastery.<sup>377</sup>

In both his actor training and play construction, Brecht tries to bring out what is socially operative, and what language can do to work out social relationships mimetically and gesturally. Yet as opposed to the Brechtian stage, Andrews has *only* language at his disposal to work against identificatory modes of reading and towards social contextualization. In his ambition “to shock, to show how much the protagonist’s path follows social norms, lacks autonomy,” Andrews pins his hope on the recognizability of the social “gest” in linguistic and discursive raw materials, which seems plausible provided one is familiar enough with US-American mainstream culture and social experience. The gest is not something generic or insulated from social force-fields: “It’s referential raw material, something that can be socially weighted, not departicularized but “socially set.” In his manifesto-like critical essay “Brechtian V-Effect Updated: Implications for Poetic Praxis” Andrews lays out his neo-Brechtian framework as follows:

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<sup>376</sup> Andrews 2001a, n. pag.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

Stop psychologizing — so that collective or institutional patterns of meaning-making can get implicated by social montage. When you twist and turn an entire system of language, its semiotic base and its layers of discourse, the estrangement is a seismology, a testing of social conditions — their contours directly affecting the details of composition. Not just keeping things fixed on the author as a single individual: that's what forces all the intensive intertextual work to be squeezed through its filter or risk getting the intertext lost in its subjectifying circuitry. Instead of glamorizing the attitudes of the author, you're more consciously orchestrating the independent aptitudes of the words and phrases: their semantics, acoustics, tone. [...] Multiple viewpoints in fluctuating focus. Using these social raw materials can make for a differentiation that starts to take apart the centrality (and compass) of the author. Subject and voice appear less like guaranteed signatures than a jewel-box of discourse and multiplicity where the reader can position herself amidst the raw materials, “ranging [her]self with the determining factors.” [*Brecht on Theatre* 60]<sup>378</sup>

For Andrews, critical defamiliarization often involves montaging and juxtaposing disjunctive elements within a recognizable semantic frame in order to break it up. Frequently driven by piercing sarcasm (“Imperialism teaches us geography”<sup>379</sup>), he excels at this technique. Juxtaposition and radical parataxis of socially saturated material are the main engines of this poetic economy.<sup>380</sup> Syntax here serves as a kind of “demolition derby”<sup>381</sup> for the intentional collision of discursive raw materials and their social gest. Consider, for instance, the following passage from “IF A PEPPERMINT PATTY COULD SING.”

No more deportation, smash all borders! Tee hee, flat &  
round  
those big harassed skirts = minute man of spiritual obsolescence, to our satisfaction! Wet wolf hopper striker  
valentines always wrong. That's why we hate nature –  
because of all the maintenance that it requires once we move it  
indoors. Lance each boil. In the bathroom, customers are king.  
I came to the party packed in soybean oil, a bit sympathetic to  
the Soviets.  
Why WASPs can't afford to have a culture – proxy puppet prop,  
cocoons with Velcro. Lobster tendencies. Proverbial nation of  
sheep details. Believe in nothing, indulge in everything – that

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Andrews 1992, 115.

<sup>380</sup> Here, and in the following close readings, the study partially draws on ideas expressed in Eric Stroshane's paper “Smashing the Control Machine,” available through <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/andrews/about/stroshane.html> (January 26, 2011).

<sup>381</sup> Andrews 1990, 31.

runt must mediate counterfeited icechests. When they say,  
‘fuck you,’ you say, ‘excuse me’? Heat beams its commodified  
juice: poison their hot tubs!  
Heavier, hoppier, headquarters just a prop vest  
reflex piety  
security: watch everything.<sup>382</sup>

As Brecht envisioned the role of the spectator, here it is the reader, who “has again and again to make what we might call hypothetical adjustments to our structure, by mentally switching off the motive force of our society or by substituting others for them.”<sup>383</sup> The passage opens with what recognizably is a political slogan of anti-racist and human rights campaigning and a leftist political stance (“No more deportation, smash all borders!”) which is then juxtaposed with a sexist statement and image (“Tee hee, flat & / round / those big harassed skirts”), as it seems, by a sexually abusive person him or herself – which may imply, for instance, the plight of sexually abused illegal immigrants who are discriminated against in terms of race, class, and gender/sex, and who are neither properly protected by law from sexual and racial abuse nor from the coarsest economic exploitation due to their status as illegal aliens. They may even be rounded up forcefully, while trying to cross, say, the Mexican border, by “minutemen” who no longer fight the British Empire but serve on behalf of the American one.

Or is it? What if “tee hee, flat & round” is read as cynical comment on the leftist slogan “No more deportation, smash all borders?” After all “skirts” are not literally “flat & round.” And what exactly happens here “to *our* satisafaction?” Who is “we” and why do “we hate nature”? Well, “because of all the maintenance that it requires once we move it / indoors.” The pronouns in Andrews’s texts are never allowed to be generic; the protean voices never allowed psychological depth. Whatever motivates these utterances therefore has to be assumed social, or psychosocial. Accordingly, the reader is exposed to psychological violence due to her own associations, while the origin of that violence is social. It is present in everyday social life but hidden, or naturalized, by ideologically functional discourses. As social contradiction and structural antagonism, the (constitutive) cracks and fissures of the totality, are “sutured” by the “sewing machine” of discourse, Andrews’s poetic praxis aspires to undo the “stitches” and “lay bare the [social] device, spurn the facts as not self-evident.”<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Andrews 1992, 115.

<sup>383</sup> Brecht 1964, 191.

<sup>384</sup> Andrews 1990, 24.

The commonplaces are like marshlands you want to step back away from; or, as spectators, to do the same thing to get a better view. Not rubbernecking, but contextualizing. Not celebrating identity, but recognizing its stereotyping & containment: how it's set up & positioned within a so-called 'bad whole'.<sup>385</sup>

Notwithstanding a Cagean element of randomness, the associative progression of the writing in *Shut Up* – to continue with the close reading of the above given excerpt from “IF A PEPPERMINT PATTY COULD SING” – is far from being randomly improvised. From the “maintenance” of nature, which may be decoded as nature’s domination, the text propels the reader to the private realm with the enjambment of “indoors.” This gives way to the (cultural) imperative to “Lance each boil,” which is usually carried out in the “bathroom,” where “customers are king.” From service-oriented consumer culture and its (cognitive) association with what is ‘happening’ in the bathroom (the Real?), the text proceeds to what appears to be the stereotype of a greasy “party[-goer].” The latter informs the reader that he “came to the party” but was “packed in soybean oil, a bit sympathetic to the Soviets” – another phonetic pun, and a historical reference alluding to the tension/split between democratic workers’ councils and the authoritarian party *nomenklatura* in the early Soviet Union, besides numerous further “multimplications.” Several semantic frames are activated at the same time: the 1980s party-goer, canned food (“packed in soybean oil”) arriving at the *nomenklatura*’s buffet, the historical political development of the Soviet Union.

The next couple of lines introduce the reader to “WASPs,” among other subjects, who despite their wealth “can’t afford to have a culture.” Is this, then, a charge of decadence (“Lobster tendencies”), a case of affluenza, or self-centeredness (“cocoons with velcro”), an indictment of the Reagan and Bush administration’s failed educational and cultural policies, or is it the laconic assertion that the ruling class cannot tolerate a vital democratic culture as this would be its nemesis? Or is it all of the above? The text provides no answers, not even further clues; it is the reader alone who can answer these questions to herself and others and who is propelled outwards into social, ideally, into critical dialogue, and collective action by the centrifugal thrust of the writing. Alliteration serves as a means of acoustic cueing and introduces the recurring ‘theme’ of reification and social control, besides referring to itself as a “prop”: “proxy puppet prop, / cocoons with velcro,” “Heavier, hoppier, headquarters just a prop vest.” “When they say, ‘fuck you,’ you say, ‘excuse me?’” stages a case of social conflict, possibly involving matter of class, and hints at the absurdity of social language

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid. 27.

conventions. “Heat beams its commodified juice” might be an obscenity reference to the pornography industry as well another Marxist insistence on defetishizing the commodity and acknowledging the labor process, and even more fundamentally the domination of nature, including man, as prerequisite to be able to mass produce “juice” and “beam” it into the “WASPs” hand who enjoys his luxurious “bath[room],” which comes with a “hot tub.”

While this reading certainly reveals more about the author of this thesis than the ‘gist’ of the poem, the former takes pleasure in the hyperbolic incitement to “poison their hot tubs!,” which also alludes to Kenneth Rexroth’s furious elegy for Dylan Thomas where a lyric voice expresses the desire to “strangle your children by their fingerpaintings / [and] poison their Afghans and Poodles.”<sup>386</sup> Is “piety” just a social “reflex,” is it to be “re-flexe[d], or is it the noun as such, which is to be ‘verbed,’ on a formal-syntactical level, in order to contest normative grammar and hint at the political problem of “how [to] democratize *framing*? ”<sup>387</sup> In any case, the passage closes with the following multi-level paradox: “security: watch everything.”

Explication here is truly abyssal; yet not so much in the sense implied by Derrida – where deconstruction as always already ‘at work’ in each text – or Barthes’s insight in *S/Z* that the “readerly text,” too, when approached meticulously enough, is always already a “writerly text.”<sup>388</sup> Rather, it is abyssal in the sense that the “multimplications” and unresolvable grammatical structures of the above example continue with the same density throughout the 300 pages of the book as a whole. Thus, Brian Kim Stefans in his review of the book feels compelled to note the equally amusing and disturbing fact that “it just doesn’t stop.”<sup>389</sup> Moreover, he observes correctly, that the writing “is not hermetic, and in fact exhibits a terrific appetite for the ‘real,’ abstract as its expression may be.”<sup>390</sup> If reading the work, in other words, seems like an ‘abyssal’ task, it is because the ‘true’ abyss is social. Explication is not the point, i.e. to say, the writing does not so much solicit a hermeneutic approach to the literary artefact (“I take hermeneutics to the cleaners”) but rather prompts a decidedly social interpretation and critique – as do decidedly Brechtian interjections such as “Pause to reflect on prevalence of U.S.-supported tyranny in Third World.”<sup>391</sup>

While many of the phrases used in *Shut Up* are clearly intended as sarcastic remarks on social phenomena with an identifiable target – “Riot Act is new name for cops,” for instance,

<sup>386</sup> Kenneth Rexroth, *The Complete Poems* (Washington: Copper Canyon, 2003) 572f.

<sup>387</sup> Andrews 1996, 141.

<sup>388</sup> Cf. Barthes 1975, 8ff.

<sup>389</sup> Stefans 1993, n. pag.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> Andrews 1987, 50f.

“Sink the boat people!,” “hammer the individual into solidarity,” “Whites give me hives,” or “We like to sit around our California townhouses & criticize Black street culture from a literary point of view” – others are more problematic and troublesome: “Israeli cabinet tastes like Mom,” or “Remember Eisenhower post-stroke?” Moreover, their juxtaposition with other elements by means of radical parataxis and dramatically disjunctive syntax frequently achieves a totally overpowering effect. This holds true all the more as the writing’s ‘bearing’ defies political correctness and assails every conceivable social cliché and cultural identity, sexual taboos, religious and ethnic sensibilities. Consider the following excerpt from “GESTALT ME OUT!”

Sometimes you just get tired of sucking the same dick all the time. I’d never break a mirror. Religion = chucksteak; ego quits its sap. All elderly feel parental. When depressed, retreat into conventional middle class lifestyles. Cheap squirt. Carry whip in traffic.

Experience counts for a lot when it comes to growing up; reorder your home life to resemble North Korea. Seen anything of Pa’s cows? Juice the worm, drip my Roentgen for the woman who does not decide. The social is really clumsy in interaction procedures – and we punish repercussions. That’s where we’re interning our next ethnic scapegoats. I’m starting to think that just having a bed is Oedipal. S/he’ll be naked & I’ll be big guns, we have these crude little summations, commerce cleanses.<sup>392</sup>

The frequently violent imagery of the text, and the *Vorstellung* of the acts of physical violence which it alludes to, sometimes approaches the effect of near physiological violence on part of the reader, as in the following excerpt from “ANTI-ELIGHTENMENT,” which opens with an allusion to Nietzsche, Adorno and Foucault – without the slightest High modernist demeanour – and proceeds with a bricolage of defamiliarized social obscenities.

Anti-Enlightenment ship of fools, seize evidence from within a person’s body – sometimes by surgery  
I welcome your copulation, jam the live lobster down the bathing suit.  
He goes to bed & he has spastic colon, redistribute wealth  
From working people to the wealthy

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<sup>392</sup> Andrews 1992, 97f.

Low riding panhead penitentiary. Uh-oh, bitter pill.  
Only the names are changed – to protect the inncoent, formal  
art among dogs: Rosie the Riveter, is that anything to call your  
mother? Swell hole<sup>393</sup>

Clearly, Andrews's writing excels at projecting social antagonism by increasing the performativity of the text, which can be understood as a systematic effort to impact the reader more forcefully. Consider, for instance, the following micro-drama from "STALIN'S GENIUS" about the horrors of (South African) apartheid and the fate of anti-apartheid activists and political leaders.

Realistic flesh tones for a priviledged in vitro few bluster douses  
crazy kooks tweet the parrot  
Biko  
Biko  
Biko<sup>394</sup>

This holds true as well for the following intersplicing, or juxtapositinoal montaging, of and within at least two recognizable semantic frames that occurs in "WE CONFINE OURSELVES TO OTHER PEOPLE'S BEDS." The two most readily apparent semantic frames in what follows are 'American consumer culture and urban social realities' as well as the 'fate or trauma of soldiers and victims who experience War abroad' (in Europe, Africa, Vietnam, or the Middle East), whether in its openly imperial ambition, or its political and humanitarian guise. All of which is underlaid in addition, as it were, with the Kantian (or anthropological) question "what is man?"

Human bomb – the whippies  
to marinate the bossom, embarrassment and social organiza-  
tion. Clouds indict skyline annoyance, the world is your  
grapefruit;  
how do you put suppositories *in*? Forest of tenements  
proprietary your bobo! – we're artists, we hate the sun; it's  
too competetive Shoppers in Washington's mall steered clear  
of grainy shots of maimed bomb victims – big butt sits on  
stoop, I was sucking ashes; launch your diet with a bumper-  
sticker: I'm going to polish the aforementioned bump.  
He's strictly

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid. 261.

couch-material

Ordain the war tax syphilitic munchkins, keep my face  
graffiti-free; there's got to be something beyond post-  
humanism.<sup>395</sup>

As soon as these frames (or others) are activated, nearly every word ("skyline," "forest," "munchkin," "couch-material," "maimed," "ashes") or phrase ("grainy shots," "maimed bomb victims," "skyline annoyance," "we hate the sun," "launch your diet," "Ordain the war tax," "keep my face graffiti-free") seems to be absolutely overcharged with meaning and unleashes images and conceptual associations of warfare, suffering, shopping, capitalist competition ("it's too competitive"), abundance ("diet"), the U.S. counter-culture ("(w)hippies"), bohemians ("we're artists ..."), and so on, ad lib. Moreover, in the midsts of all that there is there is phonetic punning and humour, and hope – "big butt sits on stoop," while evoking a scene from the urban ghetto street, can be read as the big "but" of non-violent anti-war protesters on the "stoop" of the White House.

Commenting on the explicitly neo-Marxist character of his conception of praxis, Andrews justifies the primacy accorded to language and discourse in his theoretical framework. The following statement strikes a familiar theoretical chord, but it also resonates strongly with Rancièrean concerns:

meaning has become relocated in fixed modes – migrating into containment & social governance, obedient to policing / discipline / State / stability / force / self-regulation. (That makes it easier to work with what more orthodox Marxist critics would scorn as the "exorbitation of language" – *as long as language is seen as a network of 'sense' as well as, & not just, of the play of signifiers*. Besides, any enduring social change & social value transformation takes place both '*within sense*' & '*over sense*' at the same time [my emphasis].)<sup>396</sup>

It is precisely because enduring social change and social value transformation take place "'within sense' & 'over sense' at the same time" that aesthetics is inherently connected with politics as a form of dissensus. While art and literature are by no means exclusive domains for "dissensual practice," they continue to offer "a place of refuge where the relations between sense and sense continue to be questioned and re-worked."<sup>397</sup> The fact that Andrews's writing is explicitly politicized and prompts a critique of constitutive subjectivity cannot guarantee its

<sup>395</sup> Ibid. 289f.

<sup>396</sup> Andrews 1990, 26.

<sup>397</sup> Rancière 2010a, 145.

desired effect, but it does not necessarily make it less egalitarian either. Nor does it contradict its dissensual, and thus emancipatory, political potential, as Rancière's strictures against such politicization sometimes suggest. In its most general sense, Andrew's writing challenges the limitations of identity thinking – the modus operandi of ideology – which is effectively contested at all levels of the text. A useful remark, in this context, comes from Erican Hunt's "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics."

These languages contain us, and we are simultaneously bearers of the codes of containment. Whatever damage or distortion the codes inflict on our subjectively elastic conception of ourselves, socially we act in an echo chamber of the features ascribed to us, Black woman, daughter, mother, writer, worker and so on. And the social roles and the appropriate actions are similarly inscribed, dwell with us as statistical likelihoods, cast us as queen or servant, heroic or silent, doer or done unto.<sup>398</sup>

However, as Hunt emphasizes forcefully, while language is most obviously a crucial site of contestation, there is "nothing inherent in language centered projects" that would lend them "immunity from a partiality that reproduces the controlling ideas of dominant culture. [...] Certainly writing itself cannot enlarge the body of opposition to the New Wars, it only enhances our capacity to strategically read our condition more critically and creatively in order to interrupt and to join."<sup>399</sup> Hunt's remark implies a critique of the language poets' institutional strategies and problems of marginalization as well as political co-optation rather than a critique of neostructuralist/Marxist theoretical tenets. While these matters are of crucial importance they cannot be sufficiently discussed within the scope of this thesis. They are addressed in some detail, however, in the interview conducted with Andrews by the author on September 27, 2010.<sup>400</sup> Andrews himself is well aware of the relative 'elitism' of his work and has discussed related problems at length in various interviews and academic debates within the cultural Left.<sup>401</sup> In Marxist terms, the efficacy of Andrews's method hinges on the model of mediation between the base and the superstructure. Andrews's Marxism is self-consciously Western in the sense that it accords primacy to the analysis of the superstructure in advanced capitalist societies and asserts possibilities for praxis within the realm of culture and discourse. In other words, as Andrews asserts,

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<sup>398</sup> Erica Hunt, "Notes for an Oppositional Poetics," *The Politics of Poetic Form*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof, 1990) 199f.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid. 204, 212.

<sup>400</sup> Cf. Appendix i, 215ff.

<sup>401</sup> cf. esp. Bernstein 1990, 33ff. and Smith 1999, 5ff.

if society holds itself together largely through coercions at the level of class, then you can think about that pretty much in terms of negative power, and you can challenge that by putting forward, by proposing already-existing packagings of meaning, which have been excluded, have been kept down, have been beaten up with weaponry owned by the state or by capital, but if the social is held together by the productivity of meaning, if the social is made coherent by discursive arrangements, discursive positivities, then recognizing that opens up some avenues for writing, opens up some ways of getting that implicated in the writing.<sup>402</sup>

While the social order undoubtedly reproduces itself both in terms of material production *and* discursive formation, the latter is obviously the realm where post-avant-garde praxis can be situated. Against this background, it is mandatory to scrutinize Andrews's writing practice by means of further examples from the late 1980s and mid-1990s to specify the writing's mode of politicization and particular objects of Andrews's ideology critique.

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<sup>402</sup> Andrews, in: Smith 1999, 16.

### II.2.3 Ideology Critique, Praxis, Political Subjectivity: “Confidence Trick”

“Confidence Trick” is another long poem of more than forty pages which exhibits many of the same techniques as the writing in *Shut Up*. The sequence begins with a quote from Marx: “The senses have therefore become theoreticians in their immediate praxis.”<sup>403</sup> “Confidence Trick,” as Hartley observes, alludes in part to one role of ideology: “to lull us into a confident complacency, a belief that things are as they should be (or, more negatively, as they *must* be), to create a total picture of social forces that appears natural and inevitable and therefore beyond contest.” Similar to the compositional method of *Shut Up*, the unit of construction is not the isolated word or phoneme as in earlier texts, but the phrase-based statement. Here, too, the writing is seeking an alternative arrangement, “a method of cuts and grafts” which projects the agitated totality of social discourse. This is the poem’s ‘exposition’:

Intentionally leaderless — Recite this alphabet; body never *ends*, little bits of plastic come-on, recite catatonia chic — Up anyway I Say Yes rewriting the body systematic sex cult thing; contrite — Don t give a shit *what* you think; it s all we do — Not to mention everyone is a bigot, wheels so good; how s your ambient buddy system? — If I understand these words, then I find them disgraceful — Camera obscura don t give a damn about my bad reputation — Capture the street severe machine we talk does loud fast is he rambling? — What rules are innocent, *enthuseiate* me; we died pts 1 & 2, soul not really coordinated like an orientation for me, curtsy kineme like dirt — They re not developing my image anymore, they re just operating it squeamish administrative relationships, this is not one of the regular correction tape tricks, fortunately, more American than I do; tendons as sugar, we can count.<sup>404</sup>

The poem opens with a call for radical democracy, or anarchy, “Intentionally leaderless,” but which is followed by the command to “Recite this alphabet,” which reintroduce the theme of Althusserian “articulation” (from “Swaps Ego”). Hartley thus recognizes therein “a call for order and conventional organization into a system which writes *us* as we recite *it*. Nevertheless, “recite” could also be a command to re-cite, to resituate, or redisseminate through reading/writing.” Accordingly, the reader may decode “recite catatonia chic” as a command to resituate the mind-numbing (ideological) need to keep up with the latest fashions than a command to take part in this dulling process. In his attempt to re-cite and re-articulate,

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<sup>403</sup> Andrews 1987, 142.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

Andrews hopes to “capture the street severe machine” of daily discourse and to amplify and speed it up (“loud fast”) in order to make us approach it from an unusual perspective (“is he rambling?”) by rubbing one ideological configuration up against another. Andrews exposes the rifts and mistakes which cannot be glossed over with “the regular correction tape tricks.” Again, the writing is consciously self-referential: “curtsy kineme” refers to the “social gest” again, to the performance of (gendered) social roles; Andrews even incorporates self-referential elements into his reading performance, for instance, by deliberately placing a verbal error onto the phrase “the regular [contra(c)- …] correction tape tricks.”<sup>405</sup>

Turning away from the self-referential aspects of the poem’s exposition, it is appropriate to quote another extract from the sequence to explicate its method and discuss the kind of reading experience it provides. The following passage begins with a heavily intertextual reference to an idiomatic expression used by Marx (in a letter to Engels) and the British Marxist historian E.P. Thompson’s (in)famous use of the former’s idiosyncratic term “Geschichtenscheissenschlopff,” to complain about the limitations of structuralist analysis and discredit the type of Althusserian Marxism with which Andrews is associated.<sup>406</sup> The fact that Thompson also published a book-length critique of the political ideologues on both sides of the Cold War, under the title *Double Exposure* in 1985, and edited *Star Wars* – a collection of essays opposing the Reagan administration’s Strategic Defense Initiative – provides the context for a meaningful historical encoding of the following passage. Or better, it provides a possible frame for *making* sense of it, as there are far too many references to US-American cultural specifics, ‘Third-World’ neo-colonialism, sexism, patriarchy, and, again, self-referential comments on the method and reading experience of the writing itself, as to fix its meaning. It is a sort of ‘beehive-hitting’ “stream-of-political consciousness-writing” which refuses to offer the reader any normative values, or political line, to hold on to – didactic in the best sense of the term, it avoids lapsing into didacticism:

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<sup>405</sup> Bruce Andrews, “Confidence Trick,” *Ceptuetics* recording available at PennSound through [http://media.sas.upenn.edu/Pennsound/groups/Ceptuetics/renamed-mp3s/Ceptuetics\\_10\\_Andrews-Bruce\\_WNYU\\_03-12-08.mp3](http://media.sas.upenn.edu/Pennsound/groups/Ceptuetics/renamed-mp3s/Ceptuetics_10_Andrews-Bruce_WNYU_03-12-08.mp3) (09:20 min) (July 14, 2010).

<sup>406</sup> “We might define the present situation more precisely if we employed a category found frequently in Marx’s correspondence with Engels, but a category which evaded Althusser’s vigilant symptomatic scrutiny. All this ‘shit’ (*Geschichtenscheissenschlopff*) in which both bourgeois sociology and Marxist structuralism stand up to their chins (Dahrendorf beside Poulantzas, modernization theory beside theoretical practice) has been shat upon us by conceptual paralysis, by the dehistoricising of process and by reducing class, ideology, social formations, and almost everything else, to categorical stasis … the systems-analyses and structuralisms … the econometric and cleometric groovers – all of these theories hobble along programmed routes from one static category to the next. And all of them are *Geschichtenscheissenschlopff*, unhistorical shit.” E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (New York: Monthly Review, 1978) 299f.

The umpire is corrupt, what then? – Scare tactics: baby has more candy at home, all this so-called ‘shit’ (Geschichtenscheissenschlopff), drug me – Negligible sinking ships, squashed things, why don t you abuse it? – Charlie Parker & John Foster Dulles, a workers paradise hall, spasmodic prestige, decontrol smokescreen – The witch is dead, a translation of body part aristocracy, trap you in Africa without mosquito nets! – Please continue to monitor – Americans Tend To Feel Unjustifiably Superior – Dislocation breakout, send me the weapons, governed by rules; bluebeat, getting rid of dolls – Bionic Gestapo, self-hypnosis, take it or leave it, we d have to gear down into retarded-ville, the western political world for sure, as a legend felt scumbag jerkoff shitface fuckface whorehead cluck – luckily he is a parent, you expect W A S P S, my physical & mental, scout out the daughter – Nice quaint it s so sentimental liquidity past President dry rot; which member of the Reagan Administration would you most like to see dead – How long do we tolerate mass murder, almost enough people concoct enough of this grow-up<sup>407</sup>

If there is one thing which the above passage clearly preempts, it is the twin-charge of ahistoricism and hermeticism. Andrews’s formal method brings to mind Roland Barthes’s assertion that “a little formalism turns one away from History, but a lot brings one back to it.” Significantly, for Brecht, Barthes, and many writers and artists to follow, the anti-neutrality of language led to an emphasis of artifice always charged with political significations (for instance, in the case of Brecht, against the nauseous seamless instrumentality of Nazi rhetoric; in the case of Andrews, the instrumentality of government rhetoric, advertising, imperialist policies, etc.). Yves-Alain Bois has pointed out that the distinction of two “formalisms” – Lukács’s “restricted” and “morphological” formalism as opposed to Brecht’s formalism of historical-structural signification – is “essential to a retrieval of formalism (as structuralism)” by theorists like Barthes and poets like Andrews.<sup>408</sup> Consider the following sequence from “Confidence Trick.”

The Japanese are too busy to masturbate – The first uh ohs came when I heard strings – This universalizing potential; a backflip labyrinth, the coppers are coated colossal youth suck events – Dow Jones; pop doormat, only the political realm has it – Can still sleep with the many; cash cows pander to the pirouettes – Most of life is just clubfoot you conspire to anyway – How is bebop containment? – [...] – One lean little two lean little three lean little Indians – The boy is spitting up barbecued pig skin juice while talking on the subway platform phone<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> Andrews 1987, 144.

<sup>408</sup> Yves-Alain Bois, “Formalism and Structuralism,” *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Hal Foster, et al. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 33.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid. 159.

The phrase-based statements are montaged in such a way as to address the subject, or process, of cultural othering. Forcefully, the text reminds us that cultural othering seems to be at work in anything from nursery rhymes about “little lean Indians,” mass-media stereotyping of Japanese people, who are “to busy to masturbate,” and had to be ‘sexually liberated’ by American popular culture and Western sexual mores (“The first uh ohs came when I hear strings”), Adorno’s thoroughly Eurocentrist wholesale rejection of jazz as an art form (that kept him from developing a theory of jazz modernism) which is alluded to by “How is bebop containment?” to the critical defamiliarization of a US-American teenager’s cultural habitus by means of a kind of satirized quasi-ethnomethodological statement, or image: “The boy is spitting up barbecued pig skin juice while talking on the subway platform phone.”

However, in the midst of all these social constructs and stereotyped cultural Others, seems to linger “this universalizing potential,” which is double-edged, though: it can be read as the faux-universalizing, homogenizing power of a colonizing culture that tramples over cultural difference; or, it can become the universal emancipatory potential of radical democratic politics (“only the political realm has it”) and international solidarity. Prerequisite of the latter is the capacity to recognize oneself, and one’s own culture, as Other. This capacity, understood by Žižek, for instance, as marking the beginning of European modernity, is a capacity which is still thoroughly lacking (especially, perhaps, in the more narrow-minded versions of identity politics) and that Andrews’s writing seeks to facilitate. In Rancièrean terms, moreover, it can be said that Andrews’s writing contests “consensus” precisely as it facilitates new forms of “dissensual commonsense” and directs the reader’s attention to what generally passes itself off for politics (“Recently redecorated the feeling grotesque wasn’t really as militaristic a whoop; *engineers of consensus*, like it hadn’t happen: there are no feminists in finlandization”<sup>410</sup>). Both the semantic framing process itself (which is always already an aesthetico-semiotic process) and the process of ideological framing, which demands identity, or concordance, “between sense and sense,” are no longer taken for granted.

In his discussion of Andrews’s post-avant-garde writing practice, George Hartley refers to this laying bare of the framing process as “syntaxis.”<sup>411</sup> Hartley correctly notes that “Andrews proposes a practice [...] which desires both openness and possibility.”<sup>412</sup> Moreover, whereas “[literary] realism,” for Hartley, “remains endlessly trapped within questions of the

<sup>410</sup> Andrews 1987, 144.

<sup>411</sup> George Hartley, “Realism and Reification: The Poetics and Politics of Three Language Poets,” *boundary 2*, Vol. 16 2:3 (Winter-Spring, 1989): 311-34. 332.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*

paradigmatic axis of language, [the] shift that Andrews proposes is one to the syntagmatic axis, the site of framing or structuration.”<sup>413</sup> Hartley then concludes in hyperbolic fashion: “The question now is the social organization of the chain of signifiers within specific and determinate discourses. Praxis is now a question of syntaxis.”<sup>414</sup> In other words, the exploration of the possibilities of syntactical construction serves as an ideology critique by drawing our attention to the socially-determined frames by which we constitute our world and to suggest the possibility of alternative constructions. While Hartely’s argument is basically sound, it should be noted, however, that the effect of the writing upon the reader depends immensely on the specific kind of linguistic and discursive raw materials – “semiotic rubble,” as Watten calls it – selected intentionally, notwithstanding an initial element of chance, by the empirical author to work with in the first place: “social language” as Peter Quatermain calls it, or, as Juliana Spahr puts it, “[like] all the language overheard in a subway car crowded with diverse groups of people,”<sup>415</sup> which can be assumed to be social world most of Andrews’s readers inhabit.

Striking a more critical note, Andrew Levy points out that Andrews’s texts are “semantic artifices of a very selective cultural consumption” on the part of the author:

Violently aggressive writing/editing carried out over all the disparate grounds of speech and text a professor of political science at Fordham University might have at his disposal, enjoying the privilege purchasing/listening power of his class. A collector of language specimens intertwined between semi-autonomous social ‘territories’ treated by, and in conflict with the homogenizing impulse of university, local and federal government, and multi-national corporations’ economic domestication for the easy consumption of a middle-class weaned on “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” and *Reader’s Digest*.<sup>416</sup>

Levy approves of Andrews’s “hopes to reveal the socially coded (interpreted as authorially repressive) messages inscribed in the overproduction of goods and semi-controlled babble driving the airwaves,” but appears to be regretful about the fact that “the heart of his writing is wrought through a pessimistic vision of a specifically urban psyche that repeatedly implodes.”<sup>417</sup> On the other hand, Levy finds comfort in the fact that “his texts serve no

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<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

<sup>415</sup> Peter Quatermain, “Getting Ready to Have Benn Frightened: How I Read Bruce Andrews,” in: Smith 1999, 164; Juliana Spahr, 2001, 65.

<sup>416</sup> Andrew Levy, “Fluoroscopy of the Text: Reflections on Bruce Andrews’s *Give Em Enough Rope and I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism)*,” *Aerial* 9, ed. Rod Smith (Washington: Edge, 1999) 82.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid. 83f.

apparent purpose [...] they only display their own composition. In doing so they are in the domain not of mechanical art but of aesthetic art [...] the textual contrivances of Bruce Andrews are free artificial beauties,"<sup>418</sup> all of which contains a grain of truth, but is simply too reductive a way to describe the writing, blinding out its neo-Brechtian method and political thrust entirely.

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid. 86.

#### II.2.4 More Editing, Rereading, and the Politics of Noise: *Divestiture—A*

The two final examples of this chapter are drawn from *Divestiture – A*, a more recent sequence of prose-poems from the mid-90s, generally based on the same compositional method as *Shut Up* but using new “raw materials” and “semiotic rubble” to montage them in the now firmly established manner. Sarcasm, non-sequiturs, provocational attitude, satire, and ‘ventriloquy,’ typographic play, and the self-reflexive quality of the writing are still pronounced. But there seems to hover somewhere in the background a more clearly discernible ‘persona,’ despite the fact that this is just edited material – artifice – and the emerging ‘persona’ is protean and a calculated effect of Andrews’s technical sophistication.

More frequently than before, the sentence is the central unit of composition. While most these ‘sentences’ involve a kind of telegraphing (with parts of the copula being erased) or telescoping of syntax (with elements being added to the copula in agrammatical or grammatically indetermined ways), some of these sentences even are perfectly coherent, syntactically, but usually involve the montaging and breaking up of semantic frames, and their impact on the reader usually derives from additional juxtaposition with preceding or subsequent phrases (“War: trading real estate for men. We are all put on this earth to suffer, what has become of Piper Laurie?”).<sup>419</sup> If sentences remain apparently unmanipulated, this is mostly due to their content, or locution, alone being shocking in social terms: “There are more scientists in the U.S.A. working to develop fruit-flavored vaginal deodorant sprays than are working on methods to detect the causes of birth defects.” Consider the following text, which is the second out of a thirty-page sequence of untitled poems.

Dear World, *fuck off* advice ingredients, empty swing. Studies show that couples who try to avoid arguments tend to average higher happiness scores. Sizes carried, class analysis, men’s consciousness-raising, medieval robbers, no one seems to know how many. There are freshly dug graves, but children were buried together, driven to obscurity by the unconscious need to cover up the defects of the argument. ‘I’m a knee fetishist,’ sit up, arching the back a little, the transformation of a worker into a mere hand. Noises? Smells fresh but doesn’t linger = semen disinfectant, 20kilos of heroin; if I had lost the race, I could start over, but by winning I get to race again. Eat letters! Excavations, soft minimals, ELITIST INTENSITY — institutions no more than the barricades of repression clapping his twists. Great foster argument; crabbing which count mere

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<sup>419</sup> Bruce Andrews, *Divestiture—A* (New York: Drogue, 1994) 11. Also available through *ubuweb*: [http://www.ubu.com/ubu/pdf/andrews\\_divestiture-a.pdf](http://www.ubu.com/ubu/pdf/andrews_divestiture-a.pdf) (August 11, 2011).

heart shiver joints. Kick out stiff rubbed slow far fell crib. Was eagerly — presses. Violent Crimes by Young Girls on the Upswing Across U.S. without the oppressive shadows of our protective images intruding. Clocks spike pupil visa — goes to Africa on Vacation, Returns with Bride He Bought from Tribal Chief. It's like giving your whole body a facial.<sup>420</sup>

Problems of race, class, sexuality and gender — the trinity of left-liberal concerns and analytical categories of cultural studies in the 1990s — are unquestionably posed by the text without any hint of attachment to the discourse of political correctness, or empty moralizing. Instead, the writing projects social antagonisms intent on rendering them perceivable in the reading experience. In this sense, the writing can be said to be performative, even theatrical. But as the text informs its reader in another self-reflexive gesture, “We see only the feet of the dancers, the de-socializing of language, never their whole bodies.” But is this really just a description of Andrews’s writing, or is it a reference to the anaesthetized, de-corporealized, and frequently instrumental use of language in the public sphere, in the mass media, and in social commerce? “Multimplication” and an “informalism of connections” continue to be crucial principles of Andrews’s writing.<sup>421</sup> Here is one last example:

Mavericks do not become great leaders. The organization is more the weighing of one part against another within a whole than the building of a whole through systematic succession. She is a child playing house inside her own enthusiasms, the kind of success that can only be measured in loss, a lot of useful scrutinizing, the insidious connection develops between economic dependency and sexuality. S, S, S & s & s, an intellectual: someone living articulately beyond her or his intellectual means. We have no other, a phrase that badly needs study. Nonsense bargains. I don’t want an art of visual aids, this is the problem of an index. Events now followed with bewildering rapidity. What shit about loaves and fishes? Meet-me-tonight-cowshed. Vestiges of illusionism do not overpower but assume their place in a revealed activity — “the terms I like to see,” ... Faithless Love, “defensive communication.” Well grubbed, old mole! Taken as a whole, they are like quicksilver do’s and don’ts — what is the status of ‘always’? Ten trillion flies cannot be wrong: Eat shit. Like a searchlight that had found its target, man’s auditory equipment is similarly elaborate. (‘No beliefs to propel him, only imposed but arbitrary obligations.’) The touchdowns are the triumphs of will.<sup>422</sup>

As a critique of the constructedness of sense-making (“Nonsense bargains”), Bruce Andrews’s poetry presents itself, as Ming-Qian Ma suggests, as an “inversely proportional

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid 4.

<sup>421</sup> Andrews 2001b, n. pag.

<sup>422</sup> Andrews 1994, 23f.

writing.”<sup>423</sup> For Ma, the writing is “inversely proportional” in that it rewrites the “directly proportional ratio between redundancy and message.”<sup>424</sup> In communication theory this ratio is regarded the structural-functional mechanism governing the socially sanctioned fabrication of sense. Expressed in terms of communication theory, then, Andrews’s writing simply “refuses,” as it were, to “battle against noise.”<sup>425</sup> On the contrary, it even foregrounds noise, renders it perceivable, and in the process achieves both an enormous semantic density and aesthetic distance. Refusing to “battle against noise,” for Ming-Qian Ma also means “refusing to collaborate with a contextual Other as its own double and co-producer of meaning.”<sup>426</sup> It increases the power of ‘nonsense’ or ‘presense’ by radically reducing the amount of contextual redundancy. Instead of offering an imaginary author-reader dialogue, Andrews’s texts try to occasion re-readings of previous social readings by presenting the readerly subject, as has been explicated above, with a ‘choreography’ of social and linguistic raw material which has been ceded from its original contexts, hoping to facilitate “egalitarian exchange and productive reader-editor dialogue.”<sup>427</sup>

Kenneth Goldsmith correctly observes the “unlikely pairing of radically disjunctive contexts and syntactically coherent prose,” in *Divestiture—A*, to be “preminiscent of spambot computational processing.”<sup>428</sup> But its syntactic collisions and semantic juxtapositions are still intentional, not generated algorithmatically. In other words, Andrews has to use himself as a stand-in, or “surrogate,” for what a potential reader might be.<sup>429</sup> While the editing process allows for sufficient distance from a conventional author position and recasts writing as editing, and eventually as reading, Andrews’s work, while breaching the so-called “communicative contract,” is self-consciously reliant on the idea that the reader, or audience, of his texts experience the social malaise, as it were, intersubjectively in a sufficiently analogous manner as their empirical author as to enable critical dialogue. “The political character of aesthetics,” as Rancière reminds the reader, “does not give a collective voice to the anonymous. Instead, it re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience.”<sup>430</sup> In this way, however, it aids to “help create the fabric of a

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<sup>423</sup> Ming-Qian Ma, “‘Nonsense bargains’: Inversely proportional writing and the poetics of ‘expenditure without reserve’ in Bruce Andrews’s work,” *Textual Practice* 18:2 (2004): 297-316.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid. 299f.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid. 302ff.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid. 306.

<sup>427</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith on *Divestiture – A*: [http://www.ubu.com/ubu/andrews\\_divestiture-a.html](http://www.ubu.com/ubu/andrews_divestiture-a.html) (August 12, 2011).

<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

<sup>429</sup> Cf. Appendix i, 223f.

<sup>430</sup> Rancière 2010a, 142.

common experience,” including what is common to language, “in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed.”<sup>431</sup> The following chapter sets out to analyze more closely the formal method, aesthetic politics, and political trajectories, of some of Andrews’s real-time live-editings and collaborative performances by means of available performance texts and recordings.

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

## II.3 Noise, Informalism, and the V-Effect in Performance: “The Constructivist Contextualizing of the Subject”

But what about the things that Poetry traditionally prides itself on? We could still talk about combining the Lyric with the Language focus, with Lyric regarded as a personalized vocal music. But then we'd have to ask what restrictions are being placed on musicality. And how phobic we are about noise. And how penetrated and fragile is any humpty-dumpty voice.

– Bruce Andrews<sup>432</sup>

The contemporary rebellion against subjectivity has nothing in common with the reactionary anti-subjectivity which has been under way for over forty years, apart from the conviction which has received the seal of approval from official ideology that man no longer stands in the centre of creation. But this loss is not glorified as a new, higher stage of development [...] It is as important to explode the illusion of naturalness in art as it is to dismiss the superstitious belief in the unambiguous aesthetic necessity which is grounded in that illusion. [...] meaning is inescapable insofar as it imposes itself on works of art against their will. This importunate, quasi-alien meaning, should not be left to itself, but should be recuperated from the subject so as to reconcile it. The meaning of the work of art is something which has to be produced, rather than just copied. It is what it is only by becoming itself. This is the element of action in informal music.

– Theodor Adorno<sup>433</sup>

### II.3.1 Free Improv: Andrews’s Politics of Sound and Performance

Beginning in the 1980s and becoming more apparent in the 1990s as well as in recent years, Andrews has developed a general preference for sound over sight, the aural over the visual. But unlike, for instance, John Cage's transcendentalist, or secularized Buddhist, emphasis on sound and hearing, Andrews's preference for sound and his critical-theoretical elaboration of a “political economy of noise and informalism,” (which will be explicated and critically discussed in what follows) are informed by an analytic radicalism that is intensely political. Thus, in his theoretical expounding of the political implications of sound in writing and performance, Andrews refers to the idea, “from psychoanalytic theory, that making yourself

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<sup>432</sup> Andrews 2001b, n. pag.

<sup>433</sup> Adorno 1992, 279ff.

*seen* recuperates back to the subject, whereas making yourself *overheard* solicits ‘the Other.’”<sup>434</sup> Contrary to “the visual emphasis [...] in the iconics of concrete poetry or the naturalizing graph of voice in the New American Poetry,” which for Andrews comes back to the subject only to “reasser[t] a romanticism,” the emphasis on sound, in general, can be said to be “more rhetorical, performative, and public.”<sup>435</sup>

Works are responses, and the praxis of the reader reconstructs this responsiveness. And reconfigures the relation to an outside context. Here we’re not looking for mastery, but passionate or even dizzying embrace – of an *implicated* social body. The pleasures it makes possible can’t be separated from the meanings it tenders, solicits, and invests in us.<sup>436</sup>

Andrews’s collage aesthetics and modular compositional method – the juxtapositional montaging and editing, of socially ‘charged’ linguistic raw material, collected on small cards and stored, or archived, in card boxes – as well as its tendency to blurr, or play on, the distinction between noise and music, between nonsense and sense, also opened up new possibilities for performance. Motivated, originally, by Andrews’s participation as a musician (and sound designer for Sally Silvers) in New York City’s burgeoning free improvisation and New Music scene, which was crystallizing around such luminous figures as Eugene Chadbourne, John Zorn, Fred Frith, and Tom Cora as well as the British guitarist Derek Bailey, the Japanese noise musician Merzbow, and avant-garde Jazz musicians such as Cecil Taylor, Milford Graves, or Anthony Braxton, he realized the possibility of translating his writing method and collage aesthetic into sound and vice versa. Furthermore, while authors like William Burroughs and Arno Schmidt, for instance, each in their own way have worked with cut-ups and a slip-box system, respectively, one of the most intriguing things about Andrews’s method is that it not only translates into different media but can actually be performed in real-time, too.

[...] I became a musician and a sound designer partly by just transferring the existing aesthetic I had into sound. And so I felt that the way I had already begun to work with text materials in the late 70s – somewhat inspired by film maker friend Henry Hills, who was working with film stock in that same way, and also with people in the Chadbourne, Zorn, Cora, etc. free improv community who were working with sound in a somewhat similar way ... that I started to, again,

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<sup>434</sup> Andrews 2001b, n. pag.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid.

wanting to play some role in these now multimedia performance possibilities, I started to make sound and make music, but, after *that* I realized that what I was doing with sound I can also do back again with text *in performance* by doing the editing that I normally do at home on stage – live.<sup>437</sup>

Since Andrews compositional method enables him to improvise poems in real-time, he began performing this specific type of editing “live,” in the context of collective multi-media performances, working alongside improvising musicians and dancers, effectively spotlighting and exploring the interrelationship between the textual and the performative, writing and sound, semiotics and aesthetics.

Moreover, Andrews regularly transcribes the resulting texts, which sometimes are collected and published in regular book format, for instance, in *Ex Why Zee: Performance texts, Collaborations with Sally Silvers, Word Maps, Bricolage & Improvisations*<sup>438</sup> and the forthcoming *Sugar Raised*, but which are also used as scores for poetry readings, audio recordings of which are then distributed electronically via websites such as Kenneth Goldsmith’s *ubuweb*, the University of Pennsylvania’s *PennSound*, or the *Electronic Poetry Center* – from which they spread across the internet to a growing number of listeners who may or may not become readers of Andrews’s work.<sup>439</sup> All of this highlights even more dramatically the processes of “entextualization,” “decontextualization,” and “recontextualizing” that Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, for instance, have observed to be crucial aspects of verbal performance in general. For Bauman and Briggs, performance can be understood as “the enactment of the poetic function [as defined by Jakobson]” and thus constitutes “a highly reflexive mode of communication.”<sup>440</sup> As the concept has been developed in the interdisciplinary field of performance studies, (verbal) performance is seen as a specially marked, artful way of speaking that sets up or represents “a special interpretive frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood.”<sup>441</sup> Performance puts the act of speaking on display – objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience. It thus “potentiates decontextualization.”<sup>442</sup>

While most of this holds true *mutatis mutandis* for writing as well – after all poetry, in

<sup>437</sup> Appendix i, 239f.

<sup>438</sup> Cf. Andrews 1995.

<sup>439</sup> For an online-collection of Andrews’s work cf. *ubuweb* (<http://www.ubu.com/contemp/andrews>), *PennSound* (<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Andrews.php>), and the *Electronic Poetry Center* (<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/andrews>) (August 20, 2011).

<sup>440</sup> Richard Baumann and Charles L. Briggs, “Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 59-88, 73.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

general, represents a “highly reflexive mode of communication” – Andrews’s work further complicates the matter as it always already contests conventional models of communication in a drastic manner. The important thing, however, is that it is the act of “speaking” – in its fully corporeal dimension – which is lifted from its interactional settings and “objectified,” thus creating the necessary *aesthetic* distance to experience the performance as art. At the same time, the shared physical presence of the audience, the overall social situation, and the individual experience of each member of the audience can be said to provide a perfect stage for the “dissensual operations” of Andrews’s neo-Brechtian praxis. Andrews is certainly more confident than Rancière about the possibility of actively facilitating what the latter refers to as “a rupture between sense and sense” on the part of the reader or audience by means of a politicized writing and performance practice. However, it would be false to conflate Andrews’s performance practice with those models that promote a kind of audience activation by any means by inviting the audience to participate in what in most cases is not an egalitarian situation no matter how far the boundaries between spectator and performance are pushed, for instance, in the Living Theatre’s *Paradise Now*, Happenings, Body Art, or, (more recently, and more popular) Flash Mobs, where participants are basically ‘scripted into’ the performance to abolish distance. Here, the Rancièran critique thus seems valid: the desire to abolish (aesthetic) distance, besides construing the audience’s original state as *a priori* passive, jeopardizes the emancipatory potential of art and its politicity, understood in terms of dissensus. Andrews’s work avoids these pitfalls.

In a much-noticed essay on “Praxis: A Political Economy of Noise and Informalism,” Andrews firmly suggests to synthesize an Adornian “informalism” – the idea of athematic music of compositionally motivated yet informal connections – with a decidedly constructivist neo-Brechtian, or Benjaminian, production aesthetic. Not in order to resolve tensions, but to “make progressively more appropriate the subjectively recharged material: by contextualizing it.”<sup>443</sup> While Andrews has established a reputation for ‘high theorizing,’ his ideas on the politics of sound in language centered writing and performance practice, expressed in this essay, appear to reach a new lofty high. For what Andrews aspires to is nothing less than finding a form, or aesthetic practice, which would accomplish the following task.

To heal this polar opposition of material and subject in a praxis of sound: by a constructivist resocializing and ‘opening out’ of the material, and a constructivist contextualizing of the subject.

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<sup>443</sup> Bruce Andrews, “Praxis: A Political Economy of Noise and Informalism,” *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 85.

Such informalist noise refuses any projective resolution of social contradiction. It performs this failure, eliciting a contrast with social openness. Indexed by internal contradictoriness, it offers a social model of surprise and the unforeseen, of unconstrained freedom and self-reflexivity and conceivable coherence. In sound – among other arenas – equipped with an unrepressive intersubjectivity, to bring the tensions to a head.<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

### II.3.2 Critical Aesthetics of Music and Compositon in Politicized Writing: Adornian Informalism and Brechtian V-Effect?

Andrews's critical aesthetics of music and its adaptation to writing is strongly informed by Adorno's 1961 "Vers une musique informelle,"<sup>445</sup> which ponders the compositional possibilities opened up by the work of Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Nono, among others, as well as Jacques Attali's sweeping exploration of the social significance of (modern) music in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*.<sup>446</sup> After the zenith and ensuing crisis of tonal, thematic music, the radical freedom of early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism and free atonality in music, epitomized by the work of Alban Berg and some of the early (pre-serialized) compositions of Arnold Schönberg, as Andrews observes, is not sustained. Even serial and constructivist music domesticates it, as Adorno has already noted in 1955.<sup>447</sup>

Writing in the mid-1990s, Andrews discerns a lasting "trend toward a formalist, systematizing (non-thematic) composition flower[ing] in the pointillist nominalism and material or procedural (even aleatory) fetishism of the postwar avant-gardes – in an era of Repetition."<sup>448</sup> It is the tendency towards systemized repetitive structures in such music ("anything that repeats we call Phil Glass now"<sup>449</sup>) that Andrews finds disconcerting in terms of aesthetico-political possibilities. But "future hope, in an era of Composition," Andrews

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<sup>445</sup> cf. Theodor Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992) 269-322. Adorno describes the notion as follows: "The impulses and characteristic relations of a [musique informelle] do not presuppose any system laid down in advance or superimposed, not even a principle like the theme. Instead, they produce interconnections of themselves. To that extent they are the descendants of themes, although themes are not processed in them, or at most only in a rudimentary way, never repeated at intervals. [...] But meaning is inescapable insofar as it imposes itself on works of art against their will. This importunate, quasi-alien meaning, should not be left to itself, but should be recuperated from the subject so as to reconcile it. The meaning of the work of art is something which has to be produced, rather than just copied. It is what it is only by becoming itself. This is the element of action in informal music. [...] [S]ubjective mediation appears to be an inextinguishable component of aesthetic objectification" (294; 317).

<sup>446</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi, with a Foreword by Frederic Jameson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985 [1977]). For Attali, "music is a channelization of noise" that involves issues of power and order: "[w]ith noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion. In noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men [...], when it becomes sound, noise is the source of purpose and power, of the dream – Music. It is at the heart of the progressive rationalization of aesthetics, and it is a refuge for residual irrationality" (26; 6). Ultimately, for Attali, music "is a herald, for change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society," and "the noises of a society are in advance of its image and material conflicts" (5; 11). More recently, Paul Hegarty's *Noise/Music: A History* (New York: Continuum, 2007) has partially taken up Attali's ideas, arguing more convincingly that noise is a judgment about sound, that what was noise can become acceptable as music, and that the idea of noise as process and negativity is similar to the idea of the avant-garde in many ways.

<sup>447</sup> cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Aging of the New Music," *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002) 181ff.

<sup>448</sup> Andrews 1998, 73.

<sup>449</sup> Bruce Andrews, *Ex Why Zee* (New York: Roof, 1995) 18.

asserts, “is held out for a revived radicalism of constructivist noise or athematic ‘informal music,’ all accompanied by progressive social claims.”<sup>450</sup> But what exactly is considered politically valuable here in terms of the listener’s or reader’s capacitation? In order to better understand Andrews’s theoretical framework, how it informs his writing and performance practice at various levels, it is conducive to first ask what it sets itself over against:

taken-for-granted assumptions of speech and lyric spontaneity seem shabbier and shabbier when framed against the social wave of crimes against spontaneity, against the sham afterlife of protected “free speech,” with subjectivity squeezed down to mere commodity object status within games of oneup-personship. All that tends to get registered, at very low volume levels, is the puny place of any single voice barely emanating out from inside its harmonious upholstery. If musical dissonance offers an index of the lack of freedom faced by the unreconciled subject, a parallel sonic dissonance in free and “unfitting” verse may operate similarly. To take the full measure of sense in sound would celebrate non-identity, [...] or at least disrupt the cozy traces of personalization. To honor time as the heart of the centrifugal tendencies that dishevel the identity of the subject and the stability of the traditions we take for granted.<sup>451</sup>

The critique of manufactured “naturalness” in music and mere semblance of spontaneity, on the one hand, and the negative affirmation of a non-propositional truth content of “musical dissonance,” on the other, which testifies to the “unreconciled subject,” is of course profoundly Adornian. While Adorno’s writing is habitually used to certify the utopian charter of self-consciously bourgeois art, it has repeatedly been argued by bourgeois critics and radical artists alike, that Adorno has little to offer with regard to social praxis, or, more specifically, that his writing provides no concepts, or models, which could be ‘applied’ in the context of politicized post-avant-garde praxis. Andrews, however, seizes upon Adorno’s notion of an informal composition – a *musique informelle*.

Informal construction liberates sound on behalf of a more distantiating praxis, a microtechnique of restiveness. Successions of intervals of emotional expressiveness or social resonance are freer: productive and self-differentiating enough to liquidate the given, to scrap any appeal to obligatory stylistic norms or schemata which have acquired the job of enforcement. Impulse explodes whatever shape has been consolidated, but larger architectures get to be made plausible — and

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<sup>450</sup> Andrews 1998, 73.

<sup>451</sup> Andrews 1998, 74.

comprehended by — their own tiny structuring. The sensuous articulation builds a whole out of what will only retrospectively make sense as details.<sup>452</sup>

Andrews envisions a mediating work which would be able to “operate on the sound dimension much more centrally, rather than treating it merely as a spin-off of representational continuities — as in music, with free atonality’s highlighting of color, rhythm and timbre, not just harmonic pitch structuring.”<sup>453</sup> For Andrews, what is substantial in sound is first, “a foregrounded (abstract) materiality,” and second, “a socially-semantic penumbra or kinesthetic ‘feel’ or texture.”<sup>454</sup>

Here one already recognizes the same concerns that have informed Andrews’s poetics from the very beginning: reification and institutional interpellation (the weight of tradition, generic forms and habits, standardization, homogenization, etc.) threatening sounds and words to become mere signals. Similar to Adorno’s ideas on “the fetish character in music and the regression in listening,”<sup>455</sup> Andrews suggests that the sensual particularities of sound (in both language and music) are in constant danger of being sacrificed to a totalizing whole — both within the work of art and capitalist social relations in general. Hearing itself is in constant danger of becoming schematic, as is reading — according to Andrews and other Language Poets. Radical reaestheticization, in both music and writing, runs counter to reification and institutional interpellation by creating sufficient aesthetic distance, but it also risks the work’s becoming entirely self-contained, or hermetic — a monad. “Informalism,” on the contrary, would allow

the active relationship of details in constant intervening alteration [to give] the work its concrete sound shape: spontaneous reverb, maximal explosiveness of concretely unschematic connectives, colliding textures and motions of heterogeneous instants, constellations setting free the unratiified and the nonprefab, shaking down their own provisional architecture: the inexhaustible. Faced with this breakdown of traditional form and this nominalizing of sound not to make the isolated sound into an absolute, but as an emancipatory constructivism.<sup>456</sup>

For Andrews, what has to be avoided by any means, is that “sounds are de-subjectivized,” as they are in systematic (serial and post-serial) music, “where interval succession creates

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid. 75.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid.

<sup>455</sup> Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” *The Culture Industry*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991) 29ff.

<sup>456</sup> Andrews 1998, 76.

cohesion without regard for melodic shape or tonal connotation.” Moreover, systematic structuring, with its immanent and logical ordering of whole and parts, “may make disappearing acts out of the local materials,” and thus lead to “a tyranny of form over material, over contingency.” In informal composition, on the contrary, “emancipated from schema, individual associations (in sound) act as hecklers against systemic or robotic indenture. Copula rules. No fixed mode safety-net, no uniforms.” In the case of writing, or verbal performance, the linguistic raw material almost automatically carries a social semantic charge and mimetic force which threatens the sensual particularities of the material but at the same time enables a more explicitly social address. For Andrews, then, collage aesthetics and informal composition provide a means to avoid resolving such tensions undialectically.

The non-identical, the qualitatively different: these are social tokens of use-value, more respectfully treated by collage, a principle at odds with any total infiltrating formalist construction. Montage embraces a freedom to rove over maximally various stocks of material. And the pull or magnetizing of closure ceases to operate at the overall level; it resists the obviousness of both Image and Identity. Here, no overall functional hierarchy is calling the shots. Juxtaposition of the parts cannot just be illustrative, a mechanical display of the details of subsumption. [...] Instead, the micro-structuring makes stability a localized event, not a generalized one — with representational pulls more granularized, yet polyglot: associative irregularities, interwoven and overlapping, chafing and collision, anti-proximities and semanticizing glitches. An altercation, a counter-contagion.<sup>457</sup>

In musicological terms, Andrews’s poetics is anti-cadential: “the copula rules,” as does *Klangfarbenmelodie*. Musically, just as tone color, rhythm, texture and phrasing can replace pitch and harmonic convention as a means to create resolution, a parallel emphasis on writing helps setting aside “representational euphony” as exclusive focus. “Sounds are not fated,” as Andrews puts it, “to help bolster a linear argument or confirm an epiphany. There may be no climax, no argumentative coda or recapitulation [...] the writing can put forward its own version of quasi-cadences, or elliptical chords which do not quite resolve into a tonal harmony.”<sup>458</sup>

Andrews performs a theoretical tightrope act, grounding his critical poetics, at least to a certain extent, on the idea of a specific mimetic force of art, where relatively ‘free’ forms correspond with a relative ‘freedom’ of the subject (which is something that Rancière’s

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

aesthetic theory, for instance, explicitly rejects as a vestige of Platonic logic despite its anti-Platonic political stance). Much like Adorno, Andrews wants to capacitate the subject in terms of both aesthetic experience and critical reflection by means of modernist art, premised on a materialist (i.e. Freudo-Marxist and Lacanian-Marxist respectively) notion of mimesis as the fundamental concept for a reorientation of discussions about the modes of recognition available to subjects. Unlike Adorno, however, Andrews never abandons his commitment to art as social praxis and the wish to actively politicize the material by means of composition: “Still, praxis needs something more complex than stringing large blocks (or singularities) of resonating stuff together [...]. What is needed instead are more sensuous anti-mechanical dissolutions, homeopathically penetrating the material to its core.”<sup>459</sup>

Performance, for Andrews, offers another opportunity for such “anti-mechanical dissolutions” and increased social resonance. However, Andrews also remains skeptical of its politics, if for different reasons than Rancière, observing that quite frequently “its commitment to ‘breaking through the fourth wall’ ends up in charismatic absorptions of the audience into its fixed shapes and closures.”<sup>460</sup> Thus, instead of “crude naked juxtapositions or bold thematic gestures,” Andrews calls for something more subtle: “elusive filigree, detail perfected within a dynamic syntax to the point where any clear-cut recognizably finite form is virtually ruled out,” and where the task for praxis is “to bind these centrifugal forces together: jerry-rigging the disparate, layering the thickets of the incommensurable.”<sup>461</sup> This is yet another way of formulating Andrews’s strategy of projecting social antagonism into the aesthetic reading, or listening, experience, using his modular writing technique and micro-level montage to lay bare the process of linguistic and, by extension, ideological framing, which is becoming increasingly obvious as the essay proceeds:

The material’s friction is revived, as independent details help articulate a mesh of contradictions. Even local shape self-liquidates – or turns itself inside out discovering that it too has a ‘meaningful’ social underlayer and framing capability. Social framing serves as shock, dissonance as testimony, negation, noise. Don’t get unexcited!<sup>462</sup>

Yet Andrews also points to some of the problems raised by his approach: “Are small units only miniature pictures? Little repetitive stagings to help orient the reader? Listener as

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<sup>459</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid. 80.

closure? Gesture, by overtly anticipating reader response, can easily get manipulative – all the more so because of its static, spatializing proclivities.”

This points to at least two basic problems: on the one hand, assuming that reader response is easily manipulated, which Andrews does and thus seeks to avoid, raises the question of how much agency and critical capacity the ideal reader posited by his theoretical framework is granted in the first place. On the other hand, no degree of critical defamiliarization and informal composition can guarantee non-identical modes of reception or produce criticality in the reader, or listener. Even from a book like *Shut Up*, the reader may just pick whatever obscenity she finds amusing, or what stereotype she can identify with, just as twelve-tone and free atonal compositions can serve as objects of cathexis and means of catharsis, or be ‘misused’ as functional music in Hollywood movies. This is not to say that political intentionality in art is futile, or to downplay Andrews’ very sophisticated methods of soliciting a particularly capacitating reader response. But Andrews tends to distract from such basic problems by pointing out the problems bedeviling more conventional types of political performance poetry which he associates with a “staginess of sound” that inevitably runs into limitations of a political nature:

Gestural theatrics recapitulate the reader response in advance, guaranteeing coda-like success. And in a fashion made even more pushy and showy by claims to emanate “authentically, naturally” from the loudspeaker of the romanticizable self – (in either its genteel-confessional or streety rebel extremes). (Irony just adds another layer of make-believe to the product.) The reduction of sound to such signals may help with a project of subgroup boosterism or identity-politics empowerment. But it may also abandon a project of decoding a larger antagonistic social outside. For that, we need to look again at the social subtext of sound – at how it is repressed and how praxis might excavate it.<sup>463</sup>

Andrews is certainly correct in asserting that “informalist construction, instead, offers a recognition of the opportunities for emancipating the dissonance of social tone.”<sup>464</sup> In how far this may facilitate acts of political subjectivization, and thus political emancipation, obviously depends chiefly on factors external to the art in question – in all circumstances. It thus seems pointless to reject Andrews’s argument on the basis of some equally un-falsifiable skepticism, or reframe the argument in positivist terms by questioning the work’s efficacy. It is in a decidedly Brechtian rather than eclectic postmodernist fashion that Andrews takes from

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<sup>463</sup> Ibid. 81.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid. 82.

Adorno's writing on modern music what proves congenial to a self-consciously politicized post-avant-garde praxis and simply drops the rest. Thus, with clearly discernible echoes of both Barthes and Brecht, Andrews writes:

Here, in a classicist way, to cling to an opposition between autonomy and semblance — and to prioritize the unabsorbing, windowless monad as the premier vehicle of social “work” – would be defeatist. It ignores the near language-like qualities of the musics of writing that contradict their seeming autonomy. For this is what gives them an outwardly blinking and scanning [...] involvement with a body politic or political economy of sense. And helps us experience a synchronic (or concentric) semantic saturation of sound by the social. Praxis disconfirms and de- eternalizes: as, in action, productive precipitating critique.<sup>465</sup>

Andrews later explained and partly rephrased his call “[t]o heal this polar opposition of material and subject in a praxis of sound,” from a more stringently reader-oriented perspective on the “micro and macro levels” of the text, as follows:

[T]he micro level would be the raw material, the macro level would be the subject that ‘gets produced.’ And I’m interested – in both cases – in recontextualizing the material – what I called “constructivist resocializing of the material” – to see where else it could lead to beyond what it normally does. And the same, then, with the subject, whether you’d see normally where the subject would get *policed*, and you could then see how a different reading of its context could open up new possibilities for putting the reader *in motion*, for putting the subject in motion [...]. When I talk about “perform[ing] this failure, eliciting a contrast with social openness,” if I’m saying that “informalist noise refuses any projective resolution of social contradiction” – *that’s* the “failure.” You’re showing how this doesn’t ‘add up’ in some finished, formalist, closed-off, or centripetal text. And that will then elicit a contrast with what could otherwise be possible. So, that’s what I’m trying to get at as “social openness,” which *does* have to do with newer types of coherence that are conceivable that we haven’t gotten to yet.<sup>466</sup>

In properly aesthetic terms, the avant-garde impulse to conceive of non-generic forms of composition and non-idiomatic improvisation in both music and writing may constitute what Rancière calls the “invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come.”<sup>467</sup> On top of such a metapolitical programme, however, Andrews’s writing and performance practice seeks a more explicitly socio-critical and political edge, too.

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid. 84.

<sup>466</sup> Appendix i, 242f.

<sup>467</sup> Rancière 2004, 29.

### II.3.3 Four Performance Texts: “While the People Slept” (1982), “Improvisation” (1991), “Mistaken Identity” (1998), “Blood, Full Tank” (2007)

The following paragraphs are devoted to critical readings of selected excerpts from performance texts dating from the mid-1980s to the 2010s: First, a piece called “While the People Slept,”<sup>468</sup> from a 1982 multimedia performance with Sally Silvers and Tom Cora; second is “IMPROVISATION,”<sup>469</sup> from a collaborative ensemble improvisation with three ‘free improv’ musicians at St. Mark’s Church, New York City, a few days after the first aerial bombardments of Kuwait (in the context of the First Gulf War) in 1991; third is “Mistaken Identity,”<sup>470</sup> from a collaborative improvisation with black rock-guitar legend Vernon Reid at St. Mark’s Church in 1998; and fourth, from a performance with Sally Silvers and musicians at the New York Vision Festival in 2007, a sequence called “Blood, Full Tank.”<sup>471</sup>

Consider, first, the full text of “While the People Slept,” from the BARKING performance work featuring Sally Silvers dancing, and Tom Cora following Silvers’s movement instructions, while playing the Cello. Andrews, too, moved around while reading. While there are no available records of the exact movements and music, it is important to bear in mind the sensual impact of such simultaneous action. The text opens, as did the performance, with a short note that sets up a frame and creates specific expectations on the part of the audience: “While the people slept, olive-drab tanks and armored personnel carriers moved through the snow-filled streets to take up positions in cities and towns across the country.” This note – a quotation from a *TIME* magazine article<sup>472</sup> on the declaration of “the state of war” by the People’s Republic of Poland in 1981, intent on repressing the union-led civil rights movement – is then followed by a montage, or parataxis, of contextually

<sup>468</sup> Performance transcript collected in Andrews 1995, 44.

<sup>469</sup> Audio recordings of Andrews reading “IMPROVISATION” are available online through *PennSound*: [http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Andrews/WRVU-Nashville\\_2008/Andrews\\_Bruce\\_03\\_Improvisation\\_WRVU\\_26-04-08.mp3](http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Andrews/WRVU-Nashville_2008/Andrews_Bruce_03_Improvisation_WRVU_26-04-08.mp3) (WRVU-FM Nashville, TN, April 26, 2008a); [http://mediamogul.seas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Andrews/Segue-93/Andrews-Bruce\\_2\\_Improvisation\\_Ear-Inn\\_New-York\\_3-27-93%20.mp3](http://mediamogul.seas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Andrews/Segue-93/Andrews-Bruce_2_Improvisation_Ear-Inn_New-York_3-27-93%20.mp3) (Ear Inn, New York City, March 27, 1993) (June 4, 2011); a transcript of the performance is collected in Andrews 1995, 22-26.

<sup>470</sup> An audio recording of Andrews reading the opening sequence of the performance is available through *PennSound*: [http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Andrews/WRVU-Nashville\\_2008/Andrews-Bruce\\_07\\_Mistaken-Identity-1\\_WRVU\\_26-04-08.mp3](http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Andrews/WRVU-Nashville_2008/Andrews-Bruce_07_Mistaken-Identity-1_WRVU_26-04-08.mp3) (WRVU-FM Nashville, TN April 26, 2008b); a transcript of the entire performance has been published online by Faux Press, 2002, <http://www.fauxpress.com/e/andrews/pa.htm> (June 4, 2011).

<sup>471</sup> Audio recording available through *PennSound*: [http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Andrews/WRVU-Nashville\\_2008/Andrews-Bruce\\_10\\_Blood-Full-Tank\\_WRVU\\_26-04-08.mp3](http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Andrews/WRVU-Nashville_2008/Andrews-Bruce_10_Blood-Full-Tank_WRVU_26-04-08.mp3) (WRVU-FM Nashville, TN, April 26, 2008c) (August 31, 2011); all further references are to Bruce Andrews, “Blood, Full Tank,” unpublished performance transcript (2007).

<sup>472</sup> Thomas A. Sanctor, “He Dared to Hope,” *TIME* (January 4, 1982) accessible through <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,953276,00.html> (August 22, 2011).

disjunctive but syntactically coherent sentences and short phrases:

I made my bed & forced others to sleep in it  
They avoid contact with the white man  
So, if seeing ex-hostages is your bag, ...  
We sell electric cattle prods to South Africa  
I woke up one morning converted to communism  
One handed midgets guard this empire  
The repeated analogy between butt-fucking and multinational graft is  
Particularly troublesome  
I yearn for extinction  
Balkanize the tinderbox  
Jane Fonda applauds Israeli invasion during video exercise program  
10,000 unresolved murders a year in El Salvador  
There's not too many Muslims  
Replicas of Far Eastern bank managers made from human flesh  
How's your little homeland  
From any source available, the vampire must have blood  
We export communicable diseases  
Groovy Vietnam<sup>473</sup>

While this piece might be said to be about the closest to agitprop that Andrews's work ever gets, it refuses certainly refuses any singular ideological line or affirmation.

Each of these lines seems to refuse hermeneutic resolution. The text derives its centripetal force from "multimplication," critical defamiliarization, and unerring collisions, assailing clichés with piercing sarcasm and, most importantly, leaving meaningful connections between its elements to be produced by the reader, or listener. The latter may remember that the use of "olive-drab tanks," and other weaponry, is not restricted to the eastern bloc, but manufactured in the US and sold to other parts of the globe ("Israel," "South Africa"). It may also be placed at the disposal of military dictatorships in Latin America ("10,000 unsolved murders a year in El Salvador") to effectively "balkanize the tinderbox" for geo-political reasons, the resulting economic benefits of which sustain the privileges of First World countries like the US. What the piece tries to bring about is a realization on the part of its audience of how various global events are related to the national situation, and US-American society and popular culture, or,

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<sup>473</sup> Andrews 1995, 44.

more specifically, how it impacts other societies in negative terms: “I made my bed & forced others to sleep in it.”

“We sell electric cattle prods to South Africa,” with its implicit reference to chattel slavery and apartheid, seeks to expose, among other things, the Reagan administration’s hypocrisy/hypocrisy and (racist) double-standard with regard to human rights, while lines like “There’s not too many muslims” and “How’s your little homeland” may even resonate more strongly today, being semantically charged by growing islamophobia and the Bush administrations post-9/11 use of the term “homeland” for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, after South Africa under apartheid (not to mention Nazi-Germany’s use of “Heimat”) has already abused it. Jane Fonda certainly did not “applau[d] Israeli invasion during video exercise program,” but the social contexts of such a phrase may prove less irreconcilable than appears at first glance: is it possible, after all, to think through the relations between Jane Fonda’s political activism, her Hollywood career, her video exercise programs, which helped start the fitness craze in the 1980s, Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and her visit to Israel and southern Lebanon the same year? It seems safe to assume that “Jane Fonda” and the “Israeli invasion” serve as little more than symptoms here, or rather ‘trigger,’ or stimuli. Andrews’s texts generally refuse to provide answers to the questions they raise but provide material that embodies social contradictions and encourages the reader, or listener, to think through the parts’ relationship (to the social whole) against the background of capitalist social relations and imperialism. “One handed midgets guard this empire” may invite the question who the ‘real freaks’ actually are. And the piece’s title, while referring literally to the actual events in Poland, on a metaphorical level, points to the lamentable state of US-American democracy, where the re-appearance of “*the people*,” in the Rancièrean sense, can only be hoped for. Andrews’s research into neo-Marxist theories of imperialism and his analysis of government policies, inform the writing on various levels, and it surfaces regularly with biting sarcasm in such phrases as: “We export communicable diseases / Groovy Vietnam.”

The 1991 piece called “IMPROVISATION,” on the other hand, makes much more obvious Andrews’s project of synthesizing his neo-Brechtian approach with Adorno’s notion of informal composition, and the careful attention placed on sound, on the blurring of noise and music, and their socially charged “semantic music.” Again, the performance text is framed by a prefatory note which presents the reader with a rather precise description of the performance situation, the free improvising musicians, Andrews’s live-editing method, sitting at a table with a microphone and several “piles of [...] cards [...] at times untidily spread

around” but also contextualizing the performance as follows:

We were all in many ways constantly shifting & modulating in response to each other, in the moment – (but the writing also took place under the hideous shadow of America’s brutalitarian war-making, less than a week old at that point). Below is the full text, transcribed from the recording of the performance – (with punctuation designed to give some sense of the timing & intermittences).<sup>474</sup>

Andrews begins his performance with a strategically placed reference to the opening of the final act of Puccini’s *Turandot* and the aria “Nessun Dorma,” which serves as a powerful self-referential comment on the performance situation itself, on the ‘riddling’ character of much of Andrews’s text, on the moral imperative (the American public) the and bare necessity (civilians and soldiers in the Gulf War) not to fall asleep, an admonition repeated later in the text (“America is sleeping / Are we a U.N. widow?”<sup>475</sup>). In order to better understand, however, how the notion of informalism applies here, consider the text’s highly disjunctive progression but still tangible relations up to the Brechtian interjection and call on the audience to “IMPEACH THE PRESIDENT.”

*Nessun dorma, nessun dorma.* Animal cowards / the truly ... far-sighted ’re always nagging at you / pig bounces rep – deco pig – Word / the entropic ... got up and hopped / a sex-toy lending library on wheels – like so many tenpins / sausage dazzling, congenially bumpered / race makes people // groupie prom / webwork of filth – zouk the hair-trigger / bougainvillea foster-care labanotated whiplashy robespierre cut-outs / Don’t butch my bluff / spasm some bother / beestung dildo closeups / prim suds, eggshaped /// (sp.) / mirrors; aficionados // Justice can get a bone structure; thinking is for restaurants / The hallucinogens are calling a work stoppage. The screaming had high heels on /// juicy nerve enough – the favorites are fluttering / swivel doll / Idolizing nib lump slippage = skin; dreams don’t have backyards / Sex ... is anxiety, in dress clothes / poofed by a prom ... you want your own carioca / I’m upset is ... prehistoric; teddy bears, unemployment, intercom fellatio – you want a matching grant before you have sex? // IMPEACH THE PRESIDENT<sup>476</sup>

Many of the techniques already fully developed in books like *Shut Up* and *Give Em Enough Rope* are discernible here. Despite the considerably disjunctive style and the continual

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<sup>474</sup> Andrews 1995, 22.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid. 22.

(apparent) non-sequiturs, the text somehow holds itself together by means of a kind of semantic residue that triggers one association after the other without allowing for any of these to dominate, or subsume, other elements. Rather, all elements are continually charged and recharged by the material surrounding it, allowing for an unceasing flow of (social) associations – “an informalism [of] connections.” Some phrases may stick out and draw more attention than others, for instance, due to their social charge (“race makes people”), their radically asyntactical array and funny ‘verbings’ (“bougainvillea foster-care labanotated whiplashy robespierre cut-outs”), their aural noise-factor (“pig bounces rep – deco pig – Word”), or even, somewhat paradoxically, their surprisingly conventional syntax. Yet the latter frequently leads to further surprises: “a sex-toy lending library on wheels,” for instance, reads like an ironic reference to sexual liberation and social work. But it is also a mockery of Republican ‘family values’ and quasi-Victorian sexual mores, embodied in its very form: a iambic pentameter. And if one takes the full polyvalence of the vernacular and lexical meanings of slang expressions into account, a simple phrase like “don’t butch my bluff” may ‘ventriloquize’ a closeted lesbian’s private/public dilemma.

Social antagonism and the actual violence, both psychologically and physically, inflicted upon the subject on a daily basis but disguised by ideologically functional discourses is what Andrews’s writing and performance aspires to lay bare. His concern about violence being inflicted upon the subject, in the name of, or naturalized by, ideology, becomes most obvious in the piercing sarcasm of such statements as “The *commodity* had twin to sell bunkbeds to,” “Now they’re called HUMAN REMAINS POUCHES,” “the globe’s hard financial reference point *mined* by black slaves,” or, with reference to what Noam Chomsky has called the manufacturing of consent by means of capital owned corporate media networks such as CNN, Fox, and others: “Information is a waste of fascism; your sensitivities are a bad credit risk.”<sup>477</sup> In both its written and performed variants, the text invites a kind of free associative drift at the same time as it demands a critical stance towards the material it unceasingly confronts the reader with – a kind of ‘stream-of-political-consciousness writing.’ As Rod Smith notes in his introduction to *Aerial 9* – a special issue which focuses exclusively on Andrews’s work,

I cannot think of a twentieth century artist that approximates Andrews’ breadth of *critical* reference. Like Joyce or Mac Low, the range of Andrews’ vocabulary demonstrates the measure of the mess, whilst, like Burroughs or Debord, his rabidly articulate criticality negates those that would frame politics [...] as anything other than a struggle, with stakes. [...] Negation of tradition

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<sup>477</sup> Ibid. 23, 26.

is not the point. There is no point that we do not collectively create is the point.<sup>478</sup>

In “IMPROVISATION,” satirized statements about war, global capitalism, and government policies abound: “Fastenable divestiture – assess while you attack!,” “Anti-aircraft syllables choke on votes; the big placards carpeted with anxiety,” and with echoes of 1984, “You call your clichés *rigor*. You call dissatisfaction nutritious – OUTLINE RULES! – (somebody dashed ahead of me to that specific experience).”<sup>479</sup> Moreover, the ‘ventriloquy’ effect already achieved by the writing is perceived more distinctly in verbal performance. Andrews actually sounds bored half of the time only to burst into dynamic verbal performance spotlighting absurdity and contradiction: “Foster-parents for the mermaids – the endentured compensatory // aching for Lenin – it was very cleansing but I wasn’t dirty.”<sup>480</sup> Soundwise, there is a clearly discernible tendency in both Andrews’s writing and vocal performance for agitated rhythmical contrast and cacophony, for instance, in the consonant clusters of and homeopathic amount of assonance in the following sequence where musical and cognitive “dissonance,” in Adornian terms, “accommodates” social contradiction:

Impassibly regicidal abstractioned gapping pre-op manikin syndrome, extra ego / Paraplegic unison thumping into delicacy / cholostomy harvests; insipid rapture / Bestialification, the kewpi doll … in its … deforestation mode / piss on clatter / low octane gammaglobulin / CRIME – CREAMY // big lousy eyes // eclipticism – fab, rocket, pages hoard abortives, pre-chunked, ream pez [...] <sup>481</sup>

According to Ron Siliman, a specific type of “acoustic cueing” can be observed to be characteristic of much of Andrews’s work: “cueing both through single phonemes and groups of phonemes.”<sup>482</sup> Andrews’s basic unit of composition in terms of sound, in other words, is the allophone: i.e. the phoneme-in-context, in contact with other phonemes. Thus,

the d in a term such as hard might “set up” a chain such as rod, dram, edge and bedridden … Sounding is important also because it makes the reader conscious of the presence of her own body within the reading of the poem, as the literal site of the manifestation of its meanings (which, on the page, remain in a state of latency, readiness, but never actual), and because it focuses attention

<sup>478</sup> Smith 1999, v.

<sup>479</sup> Andrews 1995, 26, 25.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid.

<sup>482</sup> Ron Siliman, “Review of *Wobbling*, by Bruce Andrews,” *Sagetrieb* 1.1 (1982): 155-158, 156.

very close to the individual word.<sup>483</sup>

For Siliman, the latter is essential “for without it the reader is apt to pass over the way(s) in which word integrates with word – or fails to – the process of meaning itself, which is continually the subject (and at risk) in Andrews’s poems.”<sup>484</sup> Leaving aside Siliman’s assumptions about what readers are generally “apt to pass over,” the process of acoustic cueing, while being most pronounced in Andrews’s early work, is indeed central to Andrews’s politics of sound. Consider, for instance, the following lines from “Mistaken Identity:” “De-oxygenate pinpoint pinheads, nab the *boost* itching bubbles,” or “Ersatz glitz tickle ink flunkie bubblebuilding right after raw.”<sup>485</sup>

“Mistaken Identity,” which Andrews edited live in performed with Vernon Reid, who not only shares Andrews’s penchant for improvisation but also his criticism of the limitations of identity politics and liberal pluralism’s repressive tolerance, performs symptoms of and reflects Andrews’s disgust for the latter as well as what Žižek calls the ‘obscene underside’ of liberal democracy – disgust for the ways in which ideology subjects us.

The situation has a situation  
Electro-convulsive opinions eat us  
Pig brink dollarization, the marriage of money gobble gobble money  
Profit margin american cream dream cultures of vultures  
A social predicament, the losers are self-preoccupied  
Jellyfish FBI — are you a vending machine?  
Who fights the free? — at least the exploited ones have a future  
Dayglo ethics, corporate global chucksteak  
Lose the flag, nightstick imitation value goosing me  
*Estados Unidos*, suck on loaded pistol  
Scale model blonde — zoloft, paxil, luvox, celexa  
Need money? — it’s easy, it’s simple<sup>486</sup>

Here, too, informal composition, juxtapositional montage, “multimplication,” and critical defamiliarization, are important means to solicit critical reader response and try to rupture the consensual framing of a non-antagonistic social whole. But the sequence can be said to be

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<sup>483</sup> Ibid. 156f.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid. 157.

<sup>485</sup> Andrews 2002, n. pag.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

slightly more accessible and more explicitly gesturing towards ideology critique (“The situation has a situation”), particularly in terms of a critique of the devastating and socially obscene effects of neo-liberalism and multinational capitalism: “Dayglo ethics, corporate global chuckstead [...] money to bork, lucky-splitty totalizing enough.”<sup>487</sup> Andrews’s overall method – understood as a praxis bent on revealing and contesting the constructedness of sense-making – seems well suited to critique an ideology which passes itself off as non-ideological, which has no (however perverted) political utopia, but depends solely on the reproduction of the status quo, i.e. consensus – part of which is the policing of subjectivities, or identities, by forms of what Foucault calls “neoliberal governmentality” and forms of “biopower.”<sup>488</sup> Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from “Mistaken Identity,” where issues of race, particularly of whiteness, sex, religion, and class (“White Collar Hairnet – Burn-outs for Christ,” “Wallet had icing”), cultural identity and popular culture, are projected into the reading experience by innovative linguistic means to test the readers sensibilities and suggest that all our (readily available) cultural, and cross-cultural (“Multihyphenate”), identities are necessarily stereotypes and always already limiting, socially “damaged.”<sup>489</sup>

#### ASSIMILATE DAMAGE

White expendable nice lopey rhythm

*Algoritmo* go-go ra-ra

White wash white noise by means of gag reflex

Multihyphenate extradictably white

*Rincon perestroika*

Junk is junk

#### BIGHOUSE

Anti-ubu, my fellow unaborted

*Guaguancó*, paba-free yiddish

Mexicali bugaloo dinky mothership

Grey as milk honky stark

Habanero or amigo-tology

Slick

Flackin’

So de-punk

#### AMADOU

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Cf. esp. Foucault 1980, 55-62; Foucault 2008, 260-271, 283.

<sup>489</sup> Andrews 2002, n. pag.

Zero slaves zap me  
Golematic whiter grunge  
Ritzy babalu iffy chameleon  
Supremacissy, post-apartheid  
Vowels with a comeback<sup>490</sup>

The units of composition, here, for the most part are short phrases and even single words. Curiously, these modular materials still have sufficient social resonance (chiefly due to languages' palimpsestual character, representing archives of social and cultural history, and the socially coded 'protocols' of meaning-making) to enact a series of micro-dramas for the reader, or audience. Frequently montage occurs within single words, resulting in such confrontational neologisms as "*Jehovalhalla* [punchy zoom]," or "Supremacissy, [post-apartheid]."<sup>491</sup> And a line such a "White wash white noise by means of gag reflex" displays the poet's inventiveness in terms of onomatopoeia and phonetic punning put to critical use. Andrews's poetic attack on multiculturalism, at least to a certain extent, is reminiscent of Žižek's assertion that leftists should indulge in politically incorrect, even racist, jokes, but in a decidedly anti-racist manner, to free themselves from ideological inhibitions that hamper a more universalizing approach.<sup>492</sup> A more detailed discussion of what Sianne Ngai has called Andrews's "poetics of disgust," the political potential of (social) affect, and the significance of humor to (post-)avant-garde aesthetic politics will be deferred to the following, and final, chapter II.4.

Consider, instead, one last example. The following is an excerpt from "Blood, Full Tank," which Andrews performed live in performance with Sally Silvers and free improvising musicians, including Henry Grimes, at the Vision Festival, New York, in 2007. As the musicians start improvising (in a manner best described as a hybrid between what is recognizable as free jazz, on the one hand, and drastic non-idiomatic, non-genre-based improvisation, on the other), Sally Silvers enters into her highly idiosyncratic, gestural, dance moves, and Andrews starts to edit and read modular bits of texts:

blood, full tank  
satisfaction guaranteed

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> Cf. for instance Slavoj Žižek and Eric D. Rasmussen, "Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek," *Electronic Book Review* (September 29, 2003), available through <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/desublimation> (August 22, 2011).

marching off to war  
ace of cakes, posse up  
uncivilization  
killing iraq softly  
doesn't everybody know everything shouldn't  
as if hell between  
democracy makes me insecure  
[...]  
if Syria / if Iran  
me too like a charity  
cluster bomb for breakfast  
quote I hate whites — justifiably unquote  
you be a witness  
slur quicker  
bomp & growl  
squawk & awe  
oh la de da  
more & more killing to support our troops  
tween lounge  
prisoner speaks good  
to hook down — sleepy hollow  
money wants to be king  
pimp my override  
hand me your ballot  
anything big seems corporate  
as the lions eat their prey  
spur punk on  
smart bombs of freedom  
to pimp their fur<sup>493</sup>

Though heavily suggestive in political terms, all conceivable interconnections between geo-political wars (primarily) in the Middle East (“killing Iraq softly,” “if Syria / if Iran,” “smart bombs of freedom,” “quote I hate whites — justifiably unquote”) post-political consensus (“hand me your ballot,” “democracy makes me insecure”), and neo-liberal capital (“anything big seems corporate,” “as the lions eat their prey / [...] / to pimp their fur”), would have to be

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<sup>493</sup> Andrews, “Blood, Full Tank,” (2007), unpublished performance transcript, n. pag.

produced by the reader herself. Andrews's informal composition makes them tangible without relying on more conventional, narrative propositions, unambiguous political sloganeering, or explanatory gestures. While the danger of 'preaching to the converted' cannot be entirely avoided, of course, the performance text provides ample possibilities for aesthetic experience and critical reflection to conjoin, or rather, play off each other, in the process of reception.

While Andrews's most recent books, such as *Swoon Noir* (2006) or the forthcoming *You Can't Have Everything ... Where Would You Put It!*, push the level of defamiliarization even further, to the extent that the reader finds herself confronted with what at first sight appears to be a foreign language with a singular and peculiar syntax ("yes, yxes xes cratch eejay bullshark speed," "icky softly impala shrooms"),<sup>494</sup> "Blood, Full Tank" can be said to be more 'accessible,' at least to readers already familiar with Andrews's texts. Since the late 1970s, Andrews has become increasingly sympathetic towards the idea of "the poetry reading as a theatrical situation," pondering what kind of connections are "actually audible [...] go over better in performance."<sup>495</sup> However, he has also addressed critically the tendency in 'charismatic' verbal performances to undermine the non-identitarian modes of reception that his texts solicit: the physically presence of the poet, "fronting the language," invites attaching the text to the person, whether or not it is personalized, or autobiographical, in any way.<sup>496</sup> Sidestepping, for a moment, the basic theoretical problem of how to adequately construe reception, in order not to risk what Rancière critiques as the performative reproduction of inequality, the decidedly 'centrifugal' effect of the text under discussion arguably allows for an opening out into the social (and the political imaginary) without necessarily "stultifying" its audience.<sup>497</sup>

civil war, the fundraiser / habit forming component parts / crowding the sugar / property is bunk / dance, dance, dance / diddly... back-talk / cha-cha finger snappin' / corporate squawkbox / a love that forgives / are we vengeful? / anti-spam, anti-virus / learn to do without yourself / supremacist / clap on / touché fallguy / nobody wants to rent in heaven / context hostess / listen to the poppy get titled up / americartoon / troops who strip / no we're not done yet / you can mistreat

<sup>494</sup> Bruce Andrews, "Where Was I Been Comin' From," VLA 1, ed. Louis Armand (Prague and New York: LPB, 2010c) 273f. The sequence is part of the forthcoming *You Can't Have Everything ... Where Would You Put It!* (London: Veer, 2011).

<sup>495</sup> Bruce Andrews, "The Holloway Series in Poetry," reading and discussion at UC Berkeley on March 17 (2010a), available through <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2lv5vDBu5Y> (1:32:00 –1:33:10) (August 31, 2011).

<sup>496</sup> Ibid. (1:32:40)

<sup>497</sup> cf. Rancière 2009b, 9ff. Rancière uses the term define those artistic, theoretical and educational practices which "constantly confir[m] [their] own presupposition: the inequality of intelligence. This endless confirmation is what Jacotot calls 'stultification'" (9).

/ sugarcane / hooker with a fatwa / who don't do right / dirty tricks / cheesier freedom / whatcha see is whatcha get / stop doggin' yourself / those snazzy helicopters<sup>498</sup>

The materials' cultural resonances reach into a wide array of subjects, from post-9/11 anxiety and military escalation ("are we vengeful?," "touché fallguy," "americartoon," "troops who strip," "cheesier freedom," "those snazzy helicopters," "MOCK EXECUTION"), to corporate power ("corporate squawkbox," "medication or litigation"), the politics of charity ("civil war, the fundraiser," "share what you got (but keep what you need)") immigration and racism ("we sucked on Lou Dobbs to get across the border"<sup>499</sup>), and religious fundamentalism and hypocrisy ("hooker with a fatwa"), while assailing liberal clichés: "violence is the weapon of the week / do anti-racists use the word cliché?"<sup>500</sup> Unlike most of Andrews's compositions, however, "Blood, Full Tank" concludes with a coda, or, rather, anti-coda: playing on the notions of "war" and "change" in a manner which creates a sense of 'linguistic nausea,' Andrews verbal performance, here, accommodates the sense of nausea the reader may experience in the face of permanent wars and the absence of enduring and qualitative social "Change We Can Believe In" <sup>501</sup> – Barack Obama's promise (and the Democratic Party's shibboleth) notwithstanding:

*when wars change, change wars*

*or is it:*

*when wars change, change wars*

*or is it:*

*when wars change, change wars*

*when wars change, change wars*<sup>502</sup>

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<sup>498</sup> Andrews 2007, n. pag.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Cf. Barack Obama, et al., *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise* (New York: Three Rivers, 2008).

<sup>502</sup> Andrews 2007, n. pag., the sequence is particularly effective in performance, cf. Andrews 2008c (06:55 – 07:16).

## II.4 “Reader Repo”: The Politics of Affect and Dialectical Shock

Maybe the procedures need to be site-specific — but in relation to a Reader. And where readerly *affect* is what activates the political stakes for poetry, its so-called ‘activism of the soul’; its ‘interrogation’ of markers of nation-state, class, ethnicity, gender; its foregrounding [...] of ‘radical particularity’; its claims to be fashioning a new public or counter-public sphere. [...] If neo-liberalism involves capital’s continuing accumulation by dispossession, I don’t think we want to be stuck with a parallel dispossession of the Reader [...]. So if the Poetics of the Reader is a *making* — e.g., producing a *relation to affect* — it’s a bigger *capacitation*.<sup>503</sup>

### II.4.1 Affect Theory, Kantian Aesthetics, and Cognitive Mapping

This chapter circles in, once more, on the problem of how to facilitate, or help ‘produce’ by means of (post-)avant-garde aesthetic politics and praxis, the dissensual “rupture between sense and sense” which Rancière regards as constitutive of the process of political subjectivization. Andrews’s enduring commitment to a genuinely “Reader-centered Poetics” – from his radical re-aestheticization of language and exploration of the procedures of meaning construction, on the “micro-level of the sign,” to the phrase-based but informal compositional method and live editing of modular but socially charged chunks of discursive raw material (and the ability to combine these levels) – has been accompanied by a pronounced effort to tap into the resources offered by various forms of critical theory. His most recent critical writing engages two significant theoretical resources, which have not been ‘tapped’ by Andrews before: affect theory and Kantian aesthetics.

In terms of the former, it seems important to note that Andrews does not ground his praxis on the assumption that the release of ‘mad affects,’ ‘reading shocks,’ “enactments of reciprocal alterity,” or the “‘phatic’ slipping into noise” is in itself capable of ‘rewiring’ the subject, as it were, in an immediate way.<sup>504</sup> The idea of a micro-politics of (counter-)affects that would make the concept of mediation obsolete as it works directly on the nervous system as a form of “positive biopower” has been most prominently put forth by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and popularized as well as critically elaborated by Brian Massumi, Michael

<sup>503</sup> Andrews 2010b, 96f.

<sup>504</sup> Bruce Andrews 2010, 96.

Hardt, and Antonio Negri. While Andrews most readily acknowledges the political significance of the somatic dimension of our everyday lives (“readerly *affect* activates the political stakes for poetry”), of “body reaction, corporeal sensation” in reading and writing, and our bodily capacities to affect and be affected, he emphasizes the task of finding an aesthetic form which would ‘create a situation’ where “affective response doesn’t get to ‘drop anchor’ in its familiar subjective harbors” and where reading, moreover, “produc[es] a *relation to affect* – [...] a bigger *capacitation*.<sup>505</sup>

In terms of the latter, i.e. Kantian aesthetics, Andrews seems to be considerably more interested in Kant’s critique of the judgment of the sublime than in the critique of the judgment of beauty. Raising the question “what happens when the Reader becomes the beholder of Beauty in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, the contained & yet limitedly capacitated Reader – as if in a reservation, a controlled space,” Andrews is seeking possibilities to “help the Reader produce experimental knowledge & not just reproduce clichés” as well as a way to “create a disruption in the transmission that would make us wonder about its conditions of production.” The ideal poetic praxis imagined here, is, of course, exemplified by Andrews’s own writing (which does not necessarily disqualify his theory, however) and its concerted effort to capacitate the readerly subject through

a *reframing* – maybe related to Kant’s Judgment of the Sublime: with the Sublime as the *system* of Language – or of Discourse, Gesture, etc. – that isn’t totalizable. With a process of reflection getting triggered, & not just with ‘data management’. ‘Look to the mountain’; take a broader view. I do like field trips. Or Frame Shifts. Or being reminded that it all could be *otherwise*. And that relations & channels which are usually invisible can be made visible, or bruised & multiplied. Where antagonisms become occasions for self-reflexivity; for the undoing of the contained Reader, as a micro instance of detotalization.<sup>506</sup>

It almost goes without saying, at this point, that for Andrews both a judgment of beauty and the experience of the sublime are to a significant extent framed by or mediated through language and our experience of the social. However, unlike for instance Pierre Bourdieu’s wholesale rejection of Kantian aesthetics and *The Critique of Judgment* as the site *par excellence* of the “denegation of the social,”<sup>507</sup> Andrews’s suggests a materialist and social constructivist turn, or reinterpretation. Aesthetic distance, for Andrews, is valuable as it works

<sup>505</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>507</sup> cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007 [1977]). 485ff.

against ideological interpellation. Moreover, “the Sublime” – understood as the system of language and the totality of discourse and ideology – for Andrews does not mark the transition from aesthetics to ethics, from a judgment of beauty to a moral judgment.<sup>508</sup> Rather, it marks a transition from aesthetics to questions of epistemology and ideology, of cognition and mediation, and what Frederic Jameson has called “cognitive mapping”<sup>509</sup> – a mapping of the social totality (as it is sutured by “the sewing machine of ideological discourse”) in order to reveal its cracks and fissures.

The play of language as action may suggest an *infinity*, an essential openness; but closure does occur outside it – in *settled frameworks of perception & cognition & feeling* [my emphasis]. Poetic work can take on that establishment: of a paradigm of discourse & ideology, of meaningfulness which is organized socially [...]: as a social body of what is unsaid, which carries (like a membrane) all that is said – the establishment’s strategic project of *already appropriating sense & already making use of it*.<sup>510</sup>

This resonates strongly with Rancièrean concerns; it brings to mind, in particular, the notions of the “police” and its consensual “partition/distribution of the sensible.” It describes very

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<sup>508</sup> It should be noted that already in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* the subject’s experience of the Sublime ultimately affirms the power of the faculty of reason: “For Kant, it is imagination that reveals itself to be powerless to master the form, or the exceptional nature, of the sensible power with which it is confronted . It is imagination that is unable to provide the representation of the whole that reason demands of it. Thereby ‘the greatest faculty of sense’ betrays its powerlessness to give sensible form to the Ideas of reason. In this way, however, it proves the power of reason twice over: reason can cross the limits of sensory experience and it can demand from the imagination what imagination itself is powerless to do. The incapacity experienced by the subject’s faculty of sense attests to the presence of an ‘unlimited faculty’ within it” (Rancière 2009a, 92f.).

<sup>509</sup> For a detailed exposition of the concept cf. Jameson 1990, 347-57. Jameson elaborates on the way in which “[Kevin] Lynch’s conception of city experience – the dialectic between the here and now of immediate perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality – presents something like a spatial analogue of Althusser’s great formulation of ideology itself, as ‘the Imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence.’ Whatever its defects and problems, this positive conception of ideology as a necessary function in any form of social life has the great merit of stressing the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated, a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience; but this ideology, as such, attempts to span or coordinate, to map, by means of conscious and unconscious representations. The conception of cognitive mapping proposed here therefore involves an extrapolation of Lynch’s spatial analysis to the realm of social structure, that is to say, in our historical moment, to the totality of class relations on a global (or should I say multinational) scale. The secondary premise is also maintained, namely, that the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience. It follows that an aesthetic of cognitive mapping in this sense is an integral part of any socialist political project. [...] The project (“cognitive mapping”) obviously stands or falls with the conception of some (unrepresentable, imaginary) global social totality that was to have been mapped. I have spoken of form and content, and this final distinction will allow me at least to say something about an aesthetic, of which I have observed that I am, myself, absolutely incapable of guessing or imagining its form. [...] Achieved cognitive mapping will be a matter of form, and I hope I have shown how it will be an integral part of a socialist politics, although, its own possibility may well be dependent on some prior political opening which its task would then be to enlarge culturally” (353f.; 356).

<sup>510</sup> Andrews 1990, 29f.

precisely the ideological and perceptual closure effected through what Rancière calls a “consensual practice that suppresses political subjectivization.”<sup>511</sup> For Rancière, again, “a *political* community is in effect a community that is structurally divided, not between divergent interest groups and opinions, but divided in relation to itself. A political ‘people’ is never the same thing as the sum of a population.”<sup>512</sup> Here, the confrontation with the “sublime,” understood in Andrews’s sense, would capacitate the readerly subject in terms of dissensual thinking precisely because it thresholds “settled frameworks of perception & cognition & feeling.”

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<sup>511</sup> Rancière 2004, 90.

<sup>512</sup> Rancière 2009a, 115.

## II.4.2 Defying Liberal Pluralism's Repressive Tolerance: A Poetics of Digust? I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (or, Social Romanticism), Designated Hartbeat, and Impatient

Rancière problematizes the cause-and-effect model which even the most sophisticatedly politicized artistic practice tends to rely on: To the extent that artworks, performances, or texts “rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects,” they may open “new passages toward new forms of political subjectivization,” while none of them, as Rancière insists, “can avoid the aesthetic cut that separates the outcomes from the intentions and forbids any straight way toward an ‘other side’ of the words and the images.”<sup>513</sup> This may be true in a very general sense, but it also gives way to an uncritical relativism that strongly discourages any attempt at direct politicization and sits uneasily with both Rancière’s own penchant for polemics, stylistic considerations, and pronounced emphasis on methodology. Being less concerned than Rancière about jeopardizing the “democracy of art,” Andrews, on the contrary, stresses the importance of praxis, and of contextualizing the reader.

If social antagonisms ‘out there’ typically recur in the antagonisms of poetic practice, how does a Reader *register* them, or *co-sign* them? Or create ‘Value’: based on affect/identification/pleasure, or on instruction/alienation & saying No to certain forms of pleasure. If ‘estrangement’ is still at the core of what we all do; if estrangement always seems like a good thing: why? Estrangement isn’t static; it has to be done again & again. Nor is it automatic. Do your verbs! Or rework our diction, rhetoric, strategy, voice. To make forms that impede business as usual. And open the possibility of instability, or ‘midrashic antinomianism’: by who? for who? [...] ‘the Reader’, even if she or he is the focus, needs to be contextualized. This would parallel the shift from Language to Rhetoric. Since the individual only exists within a social context. Readers’ affects make up a social structure. To be not super interested in phenomenology – since it’s too universalizing.<sup>514</sup>

Now, descending from ‘high theory’ to ‘vulgar sociology,’ it seems safe to say that Andrews’s readership, while considerably transnational by now, consists primarily of (lower to upper) middle-class intellectual artists, graduate students, and avant-garde and experimental art enthusiasts. Though if one defines social class primarily in terms of the structural antagonism between labor and capital (notwithstanding the fact that nearly everyone is encouraged to think of themselves as middle-class), a number of these readers may turn out

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<sup>513</sup> Rancière 2009b, 82.

<sup>514</sup> Bruce Andrews 2010, 96f.

to be ('white' or 'blue collar') workers, and even worker intellectuals. In any case, as Juliana Spahr notes in her discussion of Andrews's writing, "the turn to readers is after all a turn to a certain type of subject [...]" and as such is allied with 'identity-based' poetics and politics of oppressed 'minorities,' or more generally, what Rancière calls "the part without part," in that they can be read as dialectical halves, or tactics, of the same strategy – to critique an unexamined subjectivity that denies "the power differentials that make pluralism difficult."<sup>515</sup>

Ellen Rooney has argued in *Seductive Reasonings* that "political pluralism, 'American-style,' is nothing but the exclusion of Marxisms, both in domestic politics and abroad."<sup>516</sup> By configuring democracy as an essentially pluralistic state and all-inclusive political economy, as opposed to defining its constitutive elements in terms of political "antagonism," as suggested by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, or "dissensus," as Rancière argues, paradoxically excludes forms of exclusion, that is to say, Marxisms and other materialist discourses that "challenge the theoretical possibility of general [consensus and] take the process of exclusion to be necessary to the production of meaning or community."<sup>517</sup> Vindicating Rancièrean concerns, Rooney's study uses various sources from newspapers and magazines that depict democratic socialist and 'anti-globalisation' movements as betrayals of pluralism, showing how liberal pluralism manipulates the rhetoric of "consensus" and "understanding" in order to reduce oppositional politics to "monolithic totalitarianism[s]" and thus avoid the problem of Marxist theory and "the urgent question it asks, the question of exclusion."<sup>518</sup>

In an influential essay called "Raw Matter: A Poetic of Disgust," Sianne Ngai, following Rooney and others, notes that "desire," which is understood to be polysemic, polymorphous, eclectic, and all-inclusive, has been afforded privileged theoretical status, while disgust has largely been neglected: "theories, poetics, and hermeneutics of 'desire' abound, but there seems to be something about disgust that resists similar discursive formations."<sup>519</sup> Whereas terms like "jouissance," "polysemy," and "libidinal economy" have informed much theoretical writing for the past thirty years, "disgust," as Ngai notes, "has no well-known paradigms associated with it and has largely remained outside the theoretical zone."<sup>520</sup> Ngai basically attributes this to the fact that the language of consumer culture "offers more

<sup>515</sup> Spahr 2001, 82f.

<sup>516</sup> Ellen Rooney, *Seductive Reasoning: Pluralism as the Problematic of Contemporary Literary Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989) 27.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>519</sup> Sianne Ngai, "Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust," *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, ed. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks (Tuscaloosa and London: U of Alabama P, 2002) 162.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid. 163.

ostensible definitions for desire because it must accommodate so many permutations of this relation to persons and things,” while at the same time “middle-class morality imposes a limit on ways of expressing outrage against the dominant power structure that *has the effect of deliberately curbing our potential to articulate our abhorrence to it*, and thus the additional effect of curbing our potential to fully comprehend or theorize our response.”<sup>521</sup> Given that disgust structures many of our responses to the Real, the contemporary lack of critical-theoretical attention to disgust and other negative affects may seem all the more surprising:

In the social and material world we inhabit today it is arguable that potential objects of disgust (corporate ideology, bigotry, brute assertions of power and military force, [the rehabilitation of torture], all forms of institutionalized inequality) continue to balance if not outweigh those of desire. A poetics of disgust would begin with this basic position: that there are at least as many things to turn away from as things to be drawn to and that this repulsion is worth thinking about seriously.<sup>522</sup>

John Holloway strikes a similar note in his neo-Adornian writing on the “scream of the subject” when he notes that “there is so much to stifle our negativity, to smother our scream. Our anger is constantly fired by experience, but any attempt to express that anger is met by a wall of absorbent cotton wool.” Observing that the utopian force contained in the negativity of “the scream” tends to be attributed to individual trivia and social positivities, such as “age,” “social background,” “some psychological maladjustment,” lack of “sleep,” “pre-menstrual tension,” failure to acknowledge “the complexity of the world,” or “the practical difficulties of implementing radical change,” Holloway further notes that, paradoxically, “the more we study society, the more our negativity is dissipated or sidelined as being irrelevant.” Not only is there “no room for the scream in academic discourse,” it also “provides us with a language and a way of thinking that makes it very difficult for us to express our scream,” which is converted from “the subject of our questions about society” to an object of analysis: “The scream is systematically disqualified by dissolving it into its context. [...] It is a whole structure of thought that disarms us.”<sup>523</sup>

Against this background, disgust as negative affect appears to be valuable precisely as a negativity – being the dialectical other of desire – that is more difficult to co-opt, or neutralize. If we think of the rather trouble-free co-optation of punk music by the culture

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<sup>521</sup> Ibid. 163f.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid. 163.

<sup>523</sup> Holloway 2005, 3f.

industry, for instance, it becomes obvious that artistic expressions of disgust, in themselves, present no impediment to recuperation. On the other hand, there is a strong tendency in commercially produced punk music to tame and homogenize verbal expressions of disgust both textually and aurally, suggesting that certain forms of expressing disgust artistically do retain a significant negative-affective force. As such it has increasingly become “an important force in contemporary experimental writing engaged with ideological concerns,” as Ngai’s study evinces. According to Ngai, its “negative potentiality” as a figure of exclusion may enact a “radical externalization” by “facilitating the subject’s turn away from the object.” This holds true for both the writer and the reader. Disgust with capitalism and its “subject-centered reason” compels a writer like Andrews, for instance, “to take the impartial chromaticism of language to the extreme.” Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from *Shut Up*.

Help defeat your country—power faults keep cranium free of lint wrench to choose from a mind as free as Republicanism: late as silk, backstabbers, drop your mental candy bars, the ascension of the cookies womb, swank accommodation for that coathanger: train your friends to shit on newsprint.<sup>524</sup>

On the one hand, this is a montage of discursive “raw matter,” the latter being that which is “simply and irreducibly there,” drawing attention to its own materiality and artifice.<sup>525</sup> On the other hand, the onomatopoeic quality of the writing, the expletives, and the general “exasperated atonality” of these utterances suggests that “negative potentiality itself (manifest in paradoxical expressions of inexpressiveness) is not just an abstract signifying operation but an agency realized through a particular affect: utter repugnance.”<sup>526</sup> In this way, disgust can be said to be an integral component of much of Andrews’s work as it critiques the hegemony of liberal pluralism as a form of repressive tolerance that shuts radical critique down and requires the exclusion of Marxisms from the political arena to maintain its liberal guise.

Since Andrews’s writing and performance by no means exhausts itself in the release of negative affects, however, it may be conducive here to consider another example. “11. 3 b” is from *Impatient*, a more recent series of texts.

You use clichés a lot, I don’t know whether that’s good or bad. Come off that corpuscle, I don’t want your comment. I don’t remember asking you to talk. Just because you can read doesn’t

<sup>524</sup> Andrews 1992, 102.

<sup>525</sup> Ngai 2002, 173.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid. 172.

mean you're human. Stress test — get real! Retreat praise. Self contained dwarfing to buy success retains a sense of order. Sprinklers control me prepositioned by your own fantasies. The extortion is embastardized. How's my little skill? Did you pass your compulsory attendance test yet? Self-serving voice absolves eternal debt. Frame-breaking punishable by death. Tag me no work & we work. Quotes skid a cardiac finish fisted exoskeletal gender kills debris. Sex stamens compile throat with matchhead. Slaves of improbability trot out the mouth. Groin a book I want more hollow without transplant. I remember seeing those thoughts somewhere else. He wanted to get me to mechanize him. Well if I play the verse, you can follow me? One hand covering eyeball, the complete jargons fix your thrift. For mesmerism, we must be rehearsed. Propulsive of boys, I'm being eaten alive by my goals. Style predates intake — apparently I did, "seeking the bubble reputation" — that took care of my answer — the last thing in the world you want is for your organs to conduct so much electricity. Memory is more palatable than memory crutches to achieve a bright future. He has ignorance of ignorance. Harm does persist, not only repressed but ignored to be parented by furtive product. Don't drink water — fish fuck in it. Eat to avoid inspiration. They don't procreate well in captivity. The deepening atmosphere of fear seems to favor irrational behavior. Lockstep wants company just gulping down her formula. The integrity seems to have been discounted. Affect contraction imposed order that mammals could disinform. Quotes are surplus smorgasbord losers. Limp to talk shady talk trains of bed — & brain waves, pomp-free. One hand buys the other & absolute impotence corrupts absolutely. The masculine is at its gift advantage, makes news a neck into virulent states. Your failure lacks respect. Who writes your material? Derive me out!<sup>527</sup>

The writing here is more heavily intertextual and self-referential. However, its self-referentiality is never confined to the author's poetological musings and meta-commentary but solicits firmly self-reflexive responses on the part of the reader. The density of performatives, or illocutionary acts, though severed from context, puts considerable pressure on the reader, who is confronted with the task of contextualizing the material, and in the process is contextualized herself. This, again, is what Andrews terms "constructivist contextualization of the subject," and an instance of neo-Brechtian technique. Defamiliarized sarcastic references to the corporate world of modern capitalism – the object of Andrews's disgust – abound: "Lockstep wants company just gulping down her formula," "The integrity seems to have been *discounted* [my emphasis]," "Come off that corpuscle, I don't want your comment." Moreover, what Foucault calls "neo-liberal governmentality" appears to be a

<sup>527</sup> Bruce Andrews, *Impatient*, unpublished manuscript, 2008d; an audiotext is available via PennSound ([http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Andrews/Segue-08/Andrews-Bruce\\_08\\_Impatient-Vol-11-No-3b\\_Segue-Series\\_BPC\\_3-1-08.mp3](http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Andrews/Segue-08/Andrews-Bruce_08_Impatient-Vol-11-No-3b_Segue-Series_BPC_3-1-08.mp3)); a video of Andrews reading it at UC Berkley on March 17, 2010a, is accessible via YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2lv5vDBu5Y>, 0:46:30 min. (July 14, 2011).

prime target: “Tag me no work & we work,” “Self contained dwarfing to buy success retains a sense of order.” And the same holds true for ‘gender damage’ (“Quotes skid a cardiac finish fisted exoskeletal gender kills debris,” “The masculine is at its gift advantage, makes news a neck into virulent states”) as well as post-9/11 anxiety “The deepening atmosphere of fear seems to favor irrational behavior” and the crises of (finance) capitalism (“One hand covering eyeball, the complete jargons fix your thrift”). And the poem ends with a reference to Situationist praxis – a rather desperate call to “Derive me out!”

But what about the following telegraphic ‘sentence’: “Affect contraction imposed order that mammals could disinform.” Is this, then, some form of vindication of the society-of-control critique associated with theorists such as Deleuze and Foucault, according to which an affective modality of (bio)power not just succeeds the disciplinary modality of power that is associated with social formations of governmentality, but where affect “permeates” subjects, incorporating them within an economy of nonsymbolic intensities?<sup>528</sup> Or does it suggest a corrective to Jameson’s diagnosis of “the waning of affect” as characteristic of postmodern culture and “a whole new type of emotional ground tone,” by asserting that affect has hardly waned, but that there has occurred a drastic “contraction” of the range of affects, which makes it easier to impose, or self-impose, “order.”<sup>529</sup> Andrews’s critical writing suggests that it is both.

We counter-interpellate from the outside in, from the text being set loose to work on the affects which it stages, traceable to a social horizon. [...] If the work is drastic enough, it produces an abjection, relayed from ground zero of the social, and it takes hold of us bodily, dizzily. It makes for a social abjection we cannot master, cannot just ‘think through’<sup>530</sup>

In this case, the twofold task for Andrews’s politicized (post-)avant-garde writing and performance praxis would be: first, to extend the range of affect, and second, to “produce,” by means of critical defamiliarization, “a *relation to affect*.” Andrews envisions a writing and a reading where “[a]ffective response doesn’t get to ‘drop anchor’ in its familiar subjective harbors” and where the arbitrariness of language “isn’t domesticated by being filtered through

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<sup>528</sup> Cf. esp. Foucault 1980 on power’s “capillary form of existence” as it “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives;” cf. also Gilles Deleuze’s “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3-7.

<sup>529</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) 10; 6.

<sup>530</sup> Andrews 2001b, n. pag.

the usual packaging.”<sup>531</sup> Moreover, he asserts that

It’s not as if the only kind of pleasure we can imagine is the stabilizing haven of a subject in a plausible familiar world. The implausible gives pleasure. The unfamiliar gives pleasure. Lack of homogeneity gives pleasure. Disillusionment gives pleasure. Popping out of the stitches of suture gives pleasure. Carved out of their usual representational contexts, the language goes to work all the more extravagantly on our nerves.<sup>532</sup>

Here one may even add that disgust, too, can “give pleasure.” The passage is also reminiscent of Roland Barthes’s discussion of the political significance of pleasure in the work of Brecht as well as Slavoj Žižek’s assertion of “enjoyment as a political [or anti-political] factor.”<sup>533</sup> The unbridled quality of much of Andrews’s writing, paired with a piercing sarcasm and ‘politically incorrect’ humor, also brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s remark *a propos* Brecht’s aesthetico-political framework that “the only extravaganza of the epic theatre is its amount of laughter,” as well as Brecht’s own assertion of the political potentiality inherent in “laughing at what’s strange,” of “a certain form of learning [as] the most important *pleasure* [my emphasis] of our age.”<sup>534</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> Ibid. On the significance of humor for Andrews’s work, cf. also Appendix i, 255ff.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

<sup>533</sup> Cf. esp. Roland Barthes, “Brecht and Discourse: A Contribution to the Study of Discursivity,” *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989) 212-222; Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2007).

<sup>534</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Journals 1934-55*, ed. John Willett, trans. Stefan Brecht (London: Methuen, 1993) 430; 392.

#### II.4.3 “Frame Break Punishable by Death”: Dialectical Shock, or, Dissensual Operations and Radical Contingency

Rancière’s pinpointing of the fundamental problems that politicized art in general is faced with in the aesthetic regime (which have been explicated and critically discussed in chapter I.5) presents a theoretical safeguard against the conflation of politicized avant-garde praxis with politics. Following the ideas recently put forth by the work of Beverly Best, the challenge of politicized art and post-avant-garde praxis could be reformulated as an attempt to integrate the “production of affect” with a “dialectical shock of recognition” that would produce – through an epistemological and affective operation – an “ontological shift in the reader” to entail radical social effects.<sup>535</sup> While in no way solving the problems pinpointed by Rancière, Best’s theoretical model provides a further methodological anchoring point. While the affective experience is at least partly a result of the innate mechanism of our bodies, it is certainly, as Donald Nathanson following Sylvan Tomkins reminds the reader, a result of the “highly complex matrix of nested and interacting ideo-affective formations.”<sup>536</sup> If art in the aesthetic regime “re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience,” as Rancière emphasizes, then the readerly subject *as body-subject* – in its discursive and material formation – is the site of contestation for contemporary avant-garde praxis.

Now, returning to the above cited prose poem “11. 3 b,” the phrase “framebreak punishable by death,” whether read as a reference to the Luddite rebellion of the 1810s and acts of machine-wrecking or understood as echoing Orwell’s “thoughtcrime is death,”<sup>537</sup> points to the political significance of linguistic and, by extension, ideological framing. It also implies, to some extent, that ‘wrecking the machinery of discourse and ideology’ eventually involves material stakes. As has been shown in the previous chapters on Andrews’s work, juxtapositional montaging of discursive materials in his texts frequently occurs “within frames” (i.e. by activating a semantic frame and then breaking it up with what follows, or vice versa), and these “frame shifts” occur at such a rate that the effect is profoundly destabilizing<sup>538</sup>, and, ideally, brings about (through an epistemological *and* affective

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<sup>535</sup> Cf. Best 2011, 81f.

<sup>536</sup> Nathanson 1997, 131.

<sup>537</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (London: Penguin, 2000) 30.

<sup>538</sup> Lazer 1999, for instance, observes with respect to Andrews’s poetry: “Some acts of defamiliarization remain unfamiliar for extended periods of time. I predict that that will be the case for much of Andrews’s poetry: instead of ‘news that stays news,’ something more like ‘difficulties that remain difficulties.’ That time perspective – of decreasing levels of difficulty and defamiliarization – is an interesting and often ignored feature of critical

operation) a “dialectical shock of recognition.” Consider, for instance, the following examples: “The globe’s hard financial reference point *mined* by black slaves,” which highlights the labor process and exploitation of those who actually slave in the diamond, gold, copper, or REE mines of the Global South that is hidden by the financial metaphor. A phrase like “Einstein on his salt march ...” creates a similar ‘stumbling block’ for the reader and spotlights the fact that while Gandhi’s non-violent spirituality engaged him in an emancipatory struggle against the British Empire, Einstein’s pacifism eventually did not keep him from signing a letter to Roosevelt in 1939, urging that the atomic bomb be built (in advance of the Germans). Moreover, against the background of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in particular, this heralds critical questions about the role of science and technology, and cautions against conceiving of them as ends in themselves.

Another device commonly used by Andrews to defamiliarize, juxtapose, and shock into awareness are equation marks, which have continued to occur throughout his writing since *Shut Up*, ‘sabotaging,’ or ‘exposing’ the pitfalls of, various forms of identity thinking with piercing sarcasm, as in “kin = blood,” “whole + entire = cliché,” or “We don’t exist = ironic border state colloquialism.”<sup>539</sup> But while a phrase like “I was dismayed to read that Alexander Solzhenitsyn, uh, ... / baby, I need some Charles Bronson,”<sup>540</sup> makes for an outrageously funny comment on the effects of the culture industry and the ‘spectacle,’ in which the reader may easily recognize herself to a certain extent, others are profoundly unsettling. For instance, “Child Mob: Let those without skin cast the first rip-up,”<sup>541</sup> where images of infanticide collide with reactionary campaigning against women’s rights and abortion, including a satirical take on the Christian Right’s penchant for biblical quotations. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is the following allusion to the practice of female genital mutilation in parts of the Third World: “3<sup>rd</sup> World needs soap, thing body birth tool stoic pussy; dark ages here again.”<sup>542</sup> Or is it? After all, “thing body birth tool stoic pussy,” is not even a phrase, and the word may simply refer to process of giving birth, where a “tool”, might just be a medical tool, and “stoic” refers to the ability of enduring pain, etc. Andrews’s text here excels at triggering associations and at the same time soliciting a process of self-reflexion. Obviously, the so-called “3<sup>rd</sup> World” does not “nee[d] soap,” but why exactly did the “dark ages” return (“dark ages here *again*”)? Moreover, *where* is “here” (dark ages *here again*)?

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writing about the avant-garde” (35).

<sup>539</sup> Andrews 2010b, n. pag.; 1992, 60.

<sup>540</sup> Andrews 1992, 298.

<sup>541</sup> Bruce Andrews, *Designated Heartbeat* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006) 54.

<sup>542</sup> Andrews 1992, 61.

While none of these examples entirely escapes the basic paradoxes of critical defamiliarization and political allegory discussed in chapter I.5, each may work as a kind of reinforcement of more fragile beliefs and already existing political awareness and desire. Rancière rightly problematizes the cause-and-effect models of even the most sophisticated strategies of politicized art, including Brechtian and Debordian models.<sup>543</sup> However, the idea that politicized art may foster dialogue, critical discourse, new social forms of collaboration and political forms of collective enunciation should not be easily dismissed. In Andrews's work, moreover, the deconstructive impulse to reveal the constructedness of sense-making is coupled with a constructivist contextualization of the subject, which seeks to more fully capacitate the latter linguistically, aesthetically, and politically – “repossessing spaces & relations & articulation.”<sup>544</sup> Language is consistently treated in Andrews's work as an aesthetic and inherently political matter. In Andrews's decidedly reader-centered poetics, the politicized avant-garde dream to alter consciousness by disrupting language is rephrased as a radical democratic, or social-anarchist, call “to create that bastardization of Language which it promises itself to be.”

Meaning at the level of Signification we investigate, detonate, push into disequilibrium; Meaning at the level of Value is something we help generate; Meaning at the level of Discourse and Social Sense we help challenge. [...] We get sensational involvement and Brechtian distance — both at once, and not in contradiction with each other.<sup>545</sup>

This, at least, is the ideal. Moreover, what distinguishes Andrews's method from the political collage of, say, John Heartfield's “Adolf – the Superman –Who Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk”<sup>546</sup> or Martha Rosler's “Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful”<sup>547</sup> as well as from a ‘dialectical’ text such as Brecht's “Questions of A Worker Who Reads,”<sup>548</sup> is that there is no singular easily discernible social or political truth that is to be revealed to the reader by means of “dialectical shock” – though this may happen on a local level of the text. More significantly, however, in Andrews's writing and performances heterogeneous elements from a wide array of social contexts are constantly brought into play, cutting across a multitude of otherwise detached discourses in order to foreground the generative qualities of language, the

<sup>543</sup> cf. Rancière 2004, 62ff.; Rancière 2009, 47ff.; Rancière 2009, 4ff.; Rancière 2011, 99ff.

<sup>544</sup> Andrews 2001b, n. pag.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> Cf. Bürger 1984, 76.

<sup>547</sup> Cf. Martha Rosler, “Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful 1967–1972...,” *Rethinking Marxism* 18:1(2006).

<sup>548</sup> Cf. Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913-1956*, trans. M. Hamburger (New York: Methuen, 1976) 252.

pervasiveness of social antagonism, and the historical contingency of the social order. If there is a kind of “dialectical shock of recognition” involved, it is meant to bring about the realization that a police(d) distribution of the sensible has to be constantly reproduced by way of consensual thought and practice that negates both its own contingency and the historicity of the social. Contesting such practice through “dissensual operations,” above all, means to help reveal this contingency by rendering it perceptible in an attempt to instigate a process of political subjectivization and reintroduce historical time.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

A key notion in Jacques Rancière's theoretical framework, "dissensus" – to return to the theoretical starting point of this doctoral thesis – signifies a "disagreement about the perceptual givens of a situation," of what it actually is that is given to the senses and what allows subjects to make sense of it, what can be perceived (aesthetically) and thus addressed (politically).<sup>549</sup> Starting from this notion, this study has approached by way of a theoretically-inclined reading of Bruce Andrews's politicized writing and performances the problem of how to facilitate, or help 'produce' by means of post-avant-garde praxis, the dissensual "rupture between sense and sense" which Rancière's political theory regards as constitutive of the process of political subjectivization.<sup>550</sup> Concerning Andrews's aesthetic politics, it has been argued that his informal and highly modular compositional method (including his distinctive juxtapositional montaging of socially 'charged' linguistic raw material) and its constructivist contextualizing of the reading, or listening, subject constitute sophisticated means not only to solicit critical response but also to rupture aesthetically the consensual framing of a non-antagonistic social whole where radical democratic politics is ruled out from the start.

As a conflict between a sensible presentation and a way of making sense of it, "dissensus" can be said to reside at the heart of politics, since at bottom the latter itself consists in an activity that redraws the frame within which common objects are determined. This aesthetico-political nexus, then, is also an aesthetico-semiotic one, and the politicity of a given text or performance hinges to a significant extent on how it contests aesthetically – i.e. by rendering perceivable, or making available to the senses, through aesthetic forms such as Andrews's genuinely reader-centered, centrifugal writing and listener-centered performances – the signifying practices of ideologically functional discourses, the process of semantic and, by extension, ideological framing, divisions between speech and noise, sense and non-sense, meaningful sound and cacophony, bodily capacities and incapacities, and other social closures of meaning. As has been demonstrated through close analyses of selected texts and performances and critical-theoretical discussion of the key concepts of Andrews's thinking, from the late 1970s into the present, about the aesthetic politics of poetic form and the question of political subjectivity as it poses itself to post-avant-garde praxis, Andrews's work stands out because of its rigorous theoretical-practical endeavor to introduce dissensus into

<sup>549</sup> Cf. Rancière 1999, 28f; Rancière 2010a, 139f.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

the emerging/prevailing neoliberal and post-political consensus – from post-Vietnam to post-9/11 ‘times’ – and to facilitate political action in creating new forms of “dissensual commonsense.”<sup>551</sup>

Besides avoiding both the pitfalls most commonly associated with politicized art, such as identity thinking and blatant didacticism, and what Rancière has cogently shown to be “entropies of the avant-garde,” Andrews’s approach generally seems well suited to critique an ideology which passes itself off as non-ideological, which has no (however perverted) political utopia, but depends solely on the reproduction of the status quo (i.e. consensus), part of which is the policing of subjectivities through forms of what Michel Foucault has called “neoliberal governmentality.”<sup>552</sup> By the matching of a *poiesis* or way of doing, with an *aisthesis*, or horizon of affects, the logic of consensus entails the supposition of an identity between sense and sense, between a fact and its interpretation, between speech and its account, between a factual status and an assignation of rights, and so forth. Rather than a mode of governing that appeals to expertise, arbitration, and non-conflictual policies, consensus, for Rancière, refers to that which is ‘censored.’

[C]onsensus is an agreement between sense and sense, in other words between a mode of sensory presentation and a regime of meaning. Consensus, as a mode of government, says: it is perfectly fine for people to have different interests, values and aspirations, nevertheless there is one unique reality to which everything must be related, a reality that is experienceable as a sense datum and which has only one possible signification.<sup>553</sup>

One may recognize in this description the consensual logic of liberal pluralism as well as the neo-liberal market imperative of global capitalism and its positivization of the social and economic organization of society. Although Rancière generally avoids dealing with economic matters directly, he emphasizes that today the context that is most frequently invoked “to enforce the ideas and practices pertaining to ‘consensus’ is [...] ‘economic globalization’ [...] precisely for the reason that it presents itself as a global development that is clear-cut and irrefutable.”<sup>554</sup> By contrast, the logic of dissensus consists in the demonstration of a certain ‘impropriety’ which “disrupts the identity and reveals the gap between *poeisis* and *aisthesis*,”

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<sup>551</sup> Rancière 2010a, 139.

<sup>552</sup> Cf. esp. Foucault 2008, 260-271, 283.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid. 44.

<sup>554</sup> Rancière 2010a, 144.

what is given to the senses and according to what regime of identification, or meaning, one makes sense of it.<sup>555</sup>

While politics, according to Rancière's non-deterministic theory of political subjectivity, is an activity that redefines what counts as '*the political*,' aesthetics, as a paradoxical regime of the identification of art, while identifying art in the singular, effects a blurring of the boundaries between art and non-art, and constantly redefines what counts as art. The crucial difference resides in the types of capacities they set in motion and the dissensual movements they create: the aesthetic movement of politics consists above all in the framing of a subject of collective demonstration whose emergence disrupts the distribution of social parts, whereas the political character of aesthetics, by contrast, re-frames the world of common experience as an intersubjectively shareable but impersonal experience.<sup>556</sup> In this way, however, it helps create the fabric of a common experience, including what is common to language, "in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed."<sup>557</sup> Despite the ability of art and aesthetic experience, however, to render perceivable fractures in the police order and create dissensuality, Rancière insists that there is no *a priori* causality between such perceptual dissociation and concrete forms of political dissensus: there is "no formula."

Now, to return to Andrews's work, Rancière's insight also serves to refute the argument advanced by Bob Perelman, and various more conservative critics, that Andrews's "aggressi[vely]" non-identitarian poetics and politics, and the highly "disjunct surface" of his texts, by definition forecloses the writing's political significance – which also raises the question what various critics actually talk about when they talk about "politics."<sup>558</sup> For Rancière, the political "disagreement" emerges on the basis of a hierarchical "wrong," a "miscount" of the population. It thus creates political subjectivities, via processes of political subjectivization, that are only ever contingently related to pre-existing social identities. This is not to say that strategic mobilization of specific groups to sociopolitical ends is futile, of course, but this is not an issue pertaining to the aesthetic politics of post-avant-garde praxis and its complex and *a priori* mediated relationship to politics proper. Here, it rather seems feasible to ask how post-avant-garde forms of radical cultural praxis, if they are to be political, may contribute to a re-opening of political space and provide experiences which

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<sup>555</sup> Corcoran 2010, 17f.

<sup>556</sup> Rancière 2010a, 142f.

<sup>557</sup> Ibid.

<sup>558</sup> Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 99, 102.

may facilitate a process of political subjectivization.

Admittedly, the readership and audience reached by Andrews's (not so much "difficult," as is routinely asserted, but "different") work, in society as a whole, must be considered marginal in every respect. Nevertheless, Andrew's critique of American-style identity politics is of fundamental importance with regard to the problem of political subjectivity and should not be easily discarded. Nor should it be confused with a simple vulgar Marxist reference to side contradictions. If Rancière is correct in asserting that politics today is played out in the relation between volatile subjects of disidentification, on the one hand, and identity groups, on the other, it is of immediate significance with respect to the problem of political subjectivity in post-avant-garde aesthetic politics and praxis, how artists like Andrews position their work in relation to this shifting political terrain, and what modes of subjectivization might be facilitated by different forms of writing and performance. From a sociological viewpoint, it seems safe to say that Andrews's readership and audience, while considerably transnational by now, consists primarily of middle-class intellectual artists, scholars, graduate students, and avant-garde and experimental art enthusiasts.

Without naively resuming the avant-garde figure of the producer, one might recall here Walter Benjamin's notion of a "mediated solidarity" (expressed through a commitment to changing the 'modes of production' of art, i.e. of bourgeois forms and techniques) between the bourgeois intellectual artist and the working class (as well as oppressed nationalities, sexual minorities, etc.) to further elucidate the political significance of Andrews's project.<sup>559</sup> As Juliana Spahr notes in her discussion of Andrews's writing, "the turn to readers is after all a turn to a certain type of subject [...]" and as such is allied with 'identity-based' poetics and politics of oppressed 'minorities,' or more generally, and in Rancièrean terms, "the part of those without part," in that they can be read as dialectical halves, or tactics, of the same strategy – "to critique an unexamined subjectivity that denies power differentials."<sup>560</sup> Andrews's trenchant critique of liberal pluralism's repressive tolerance directs the reader's or listener's attention to the power differentials that make pluralism difficult. Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought, and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking, and altering the coordinates of the shared world, which in Andrews's non-vanguardist political framework is each of us. In such a way, the kind of "connective reading"<sup>561</sup> promoted by Andrews, as Spahr puts it in her

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<sup>559</sup> Benjamin 1970, 90.

<sup>560</sup> Spahr 2001, 82f.

<sup>561</sup> Cf. Spahr 2001, 51ff.

study of contemporary post-avant-garde poetics, contributes to a collective understanding of emancipation as “the collectivization of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus.”<sup>562</sup>

Studying the work of Andrews also reveals the important socio-practical dimension of post-avant-garde praxis as it creates the opportunity, by means of collective action, to build context and introduce concepts through counter-hegemonic institutions. In other words, it creates its own counter-hegemonic context in which an aesthetic politics is collaboratively forged and full participation is encouraged. Critical reflection on this social *and* aesthetico-political nexus is what is absent from Rancière’s account. Rather than rejecting Rancière’s theory on the basis of its anti-sociological bias, however, it should be supplemented with a neo-Marxist sociological corrective to prevent an idealist reading. Rancière’s Foucault-inspired archaeology of the “aesthetic regime” lays open again from the ‘discursive rubble’ of sociologically informed art theory the emancipatory kernel of aesthetics by rethinking it as a form of dissensus, and by “politicizing its terminological foundation.”<sup>563</sup> Notwithstanding Rancière’s claims to the opposite though, a wholesale rejection of a Hegelian/Marxist notion of critique for its allegedly anti-egalitarian logic which entails the performative reproduction of inequality in favor of a decidedly Kantian notion of critique – “re-examined perhaps by Foucault”<sup>564</sup> – as opposed to Adorno’s attempt of dialectically wedding them, risks lapsing into idealism by downplaying existential material and psychosocial constraints on agency and the power of ideologically functional discourses over subjects by the same token. It may also lead away prematurely, as Andrews’s work strongly suggests, from the notion of art as radical cultural praxis.

While it should be obvious that a given “distribution/partition of the sensible” can be both critiqued and politically contested without ever involving forms of post-avant-garde praxis, or art in general, Rancière’s insight about the inherent aesthetic dimension of emancipatory politics warrants a comprehensive reconsideration of the politicity (not realpolitikal efficacy) of politicized art’s “dissensual operations,” avant-garde or otherwise. If any assessment of the political significance of Andrews’s politicized writing and performances qua the concept of dissensus is all but methodologically unproblematic, it is certainly improving on the lamentable absence of even a proper working definition of “politics” from most studies of politicized avant-garde or post-avant-garde writing and performance. Rather frequently, the specificity of politics is collapsed with various forms of social and cultural criticism or the

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<sup>562</sup> Rancière 2009b, 49.

<sup>563</sup> Grabher 2009, n. pag.

<sup>564</sup> Rancière 2004, 13.

exercise of power. This holds true even for such sophisticated theorists as Hal Foster, among others, who provides important new critical genealogies of the avant-garde and emphasizes its pivotal role as a “crucial coarticulation of artistic and political forms,” without ever engaging the problem of political subjectivity.

By reading Andrews’s work through Rancière’s post-Marxist aesthetic and political theory, while distinguishing the neo-Marxist and (post-)structuralist theories that inform his poetics and aesthetico-political framework, this study has shown the internal dialectic of critical theory and cultural praxis to be a salient feature of Andrews’s rigorously politicized writing and performances. The question whether this could serve as a definitional criterion for contemporary avant-garde theory to distinguish decidedly post-avant-garde from ‘experimental’ forms of art, offers an interesting avenue for future research. For Andrews, the tradition of Cultural Marxism as well as the work of Althusser and Foucault, among others, in the first place, provides concepts for thinking about “what’s in the way of progressive social change”<sup>565</sup> as well as what forecloses radical democratic politics by means of consensual practice. In fact, it seems that Andrews’s theoretical framework, while retaining a strong neo-Marxists emphasis on ideology critique, resonates strongly with Rancièrean notions.

The play of language as action may suggests an infinity, an essential openness; but closure does occur outside it – in *settled frameworks of perception & cognition & feeling* [my emphasis]. Poetic work can take on that establishment: of a paradigm of discourse & ideology, of meaningfulness which is organized socially, or socially coded, just like a sign: as a social body of what is unsaid, which carries (like a membrane) all that is said – the establishment’s strategic project of *already appropriating sense & already making use of it* [my emphasis].<sup>566</sup>

The passage accurately describes the ideological and perceptual closure that is effected through what Rancière calls a “consensual practice that suppresses political subjectivization.”<sup>567</sup> Andrews’s ‘dissensual operations,’ on the contrary, seek to capacitate the reading or listening subject precisely by thresholding “settled frameworks of perception & cognition & feeling.”

While Andrews’s work cannot entirely escape the basic problems of critical defamiliarization and political allegory discussed in chapters I.7 and II.4, it effectively works, in the very least, as a kind of reinforcement and broadening of the scope of political desire

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<sup>565</sup> Appendix i, 229.

<sup>566</sup> Andrews 1990, 29f.

<sup>567</sup> Rancière 2004, 90.

and already existing critical awareness. Rancière rightly problematizes the cause-and-effect models of even the most sophisticated strategies of politicized art, including the Brechtian and Debordian models which have informed Andrews's work to a significant extent.<sup>568</sup> However, the idea that politicized art may foster dialogue, critical discourse, new social forms of collaboration and political forms of collective enunciation should not be easily dismissed. In Andrews's work, moreover, the deconstructive impulse to reveal the constructedness of sense-making is coupled with a constructivist contextualization of the subject which seeks to more fully capacitate the latter linguistically, aesthetically, and politically – “repossessing spaces & relations & articulation.”<sup>569</sup> Language is consistently treated in Andrews's work as an aesthetic and inherently political matter. In Andrews's decidedly reader-centered poetics, the politicized avant-garde dream to alter consciousness by disrupting language is rephrased as a radical democratic call “to create that bastardization of Language which it promises itself to be.” Like most radical artists and theorists associated with Western Marxism, Andrews asserts that since the reproduction of the social status quo is thoroughly dependant upon ideology and language (“language in ideology and ideology in language”), discursive praxis – i.e. “working *in* the superstructure”<sup>570</sup> – eventually involves political and material stakes.

More significantly, however, in Andrews's writing and performances heterogeneous elements from a wide array of social fields are constantly brought into play, cutting across a multitude of otherwise detached discourses in order to foreground the generative qualities of language, the pervasiveness of social antagonism, and the radical contingency of the social order. Projecting the pervasiveness of social antagonism into the reading and listening experience by performative means and making it available to the senses, moreover, Andrews's work might be understood in terms of what Frederic Jameson has called “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping.”<sup>571</sup> While Jameson himself has famously expressed his disappointment with Language Poetry, in political terms, in his reading of Bob Perelman's “China” in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*,<sup>572</sup> pinning his hope instead on the emergence of new forms of critical Realism,<sup>573</sup> especially in the domains of film and literature, that would allow for a “cognitive mapping” of the social totality and more substantially capacitate the subject as it ‘defies reification's gravity,’ Andrews boldly suggests

<sup>568</sup> Cf. Rancière 2004, 62ff.; Rancière 2009a, 47ff.; Rancière 2009b, 4ff.; Rancière 2011, 99ff.

<sup>569</sup> Andrews 2001b, n. pag.

<sup>570</sup> Appendix i, 221.

<sup>571</sup> Jameson 1990, 347.

<sup>572</sup> Cf. Jameson 1991, 28ff.

<sup>573</sup> Cf. Jameson 1990, 347-57; Jameson 2007a, 211f.

that “the ‘real’ is at odds with Realism.”<sup>574</sup> The continued existence of the Realism/Modernism debate with its emphasis on epistemology and the Marxist theorization of the dialectical relationship of individual and society as mediated through works of art under late capitalist conditions is another phenomenon which this study has confirmed but which exceeds the scope of its investigation and begs further research.

Problematicizing the notion of a postmodern ‘crisis of representation,’ Rancière’s theory redirects critical attention to what he considers art’s potential capacity to open “new passages toward new forms of political subjectivization” by reworking “the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects.”<sup>575</sup> In contradistinction to a Deleuzian micro-politics of affect, however, Rancière insists that no artistic practice can avoid “the aesthetic cut that separates the outcomes from the intentions and forbids any straight way toward an ‘other side’ of the words and the images.”<sup>576</sup> Andrews readily acknowledges the political significance of the somatic dimension of our lives. Contrary to both Deleuze and Rancière, however, he conceives of “readerly *affect*” as that which “activates the political stakes for poetry,” emphasizing the task of conceiving a form which would ‘create a situation’ where reading or listening “produc[es] a *relation to affect*,” thus effecting “a bigger *capacitation*.”<sup>577</sup> As has been demonstrated and discussed at length in CHAPTER II, this is a task at which Andrews arguably excels at.

If there is a kind of “dialectical shock of recognition” involved, to use Beverly Best’s term again, in reading Andrews or hearing him perform, it is perhaps most likely the realization that the police’s *partage du sensible* has to be constantly reproduced by means of a consensual practice that negates its own historical contingency. Contesting such practice through “dissensual operations,” is to help reveal this contingency without reifying it, showing that “every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification.”<sup>578</sup> Andrews’s writing and performance practice thus must be understood as a radical and hopeful cultural praxis continually reinforcing the thought, as Adorno puts it, “that things could be otherwise.” Much like Rancière’s aesthetic and political theory, Andrews’s work acknowledges the emancipatory kernel of aesthetic metapolitics, while renouncing the archi-political conception of the avant-garde, i.e. its vanguardist ideology. At the same time, however, Andrews is less anxious than both Adorno

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<sup>574</sup> Andrews 1996, 110.

<sup>575</sup> Rancière 2009b, 82.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid.

<sup>577</sup> Andrews, 2010b, 97.

<sup>578</sup> Rancière 2009b, 48f.

and Rancière, respectively, to tie art – qua neo-Brechtian method – to the task of radical critique, of constitutive subjectivity and ideologically functional discourses, and to conceive of the reading or listening subject as the site of contestation for post-avant-garde praxis – as *body-subject* in its discursive and material formation. Eventually, and perhaps most importantly, it reinforces the thought that every consensual order can be radically transformed through democratic politics – unless “politics happens every four years,” “spreadin’ demoCrazy” instead.<sup>579</sup>

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<sup>579</sup> Andrews 1992, 132; Andrews 2010a, (0:55:45 min).

## Appendix i

### **Interview: Bruce Andrews (NYC, September 27, 2010)**

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**Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich:** Many thanks, Bruce, for inviting me and taking the time to do this interview. So, let's jump right in. Before going into the more theoretically-inclined questions, would you mind giving us a short rundown of how you got involved with the Downtown New York art scene and became a driving force of so-called "Language Poetry" in the 1970s?

**Bruce Andrews:** That's a huge autobiographical question. But ... a couple of short things. I had some connection with that scene before I moved to New York, when I was in graduate school in the early 70s. Some of that is represented in my editing of the special issue of *Toothpick, Lisbon, and the Orcas Islands* in 1973 — and that is up on the web now as part of Craig Dworkin's *Eclipse* site, so you can take a look at some of what I was interested in, in 1973. I came to New York City in 1975. I started writing in 1969, and began to be in touch with some of the people that, later in the 1970s, came to be called the "Language Poets" — I was in correspondence with them in the early 70s. So, in the early 70s I'm going to grad school, I'm fascinated by avant-garde art activities in a variety of fields, and I'm starting to write and publish, and I'm in touch now with people that would form this phenomenon a little bit later. So I come to New York in 1975, partly a coincidence (that that was the only professorial job that I got, it wasn't like many people of my ... / at that age I wasn't just moving to New York in order to be in New York). It was just a stroke of incredible luck for me that I got a teaching job here in Political Science. So, I moved to town still with this fascination about what was going on in music in a variety of genres, what's going on in theatre, what's going on in dance, what's going on in the visual arts ... and dropped right in a hotbed of incredible activity in all those fields. And that interest in those other fields shaped my conception — as you can see a little bit in the *Toothpick* issue — of what would be a relevant kind of literary writing.

I've said this before in interviews, but when what we were calling, in our correspondence, "Language-centered Writing" started to become known outside of the immediate participants it came to be known as "Language Poetry". And I have said before that, to me, it was the P-part of that rather than the L-part that I thought was a problem. I wasn't really thinking that

we were helping to create a new sub-genre of poetry, but that we were creating a new formulation or articulation of a type of arts activity that would have some parallels with what was going on in these other art fields. And for a while in New York, in the late 70s and early 80s, it seemed possible to sustain a community of people in the literary world that were also in touch with — in close, intimate touch with — what was going on with people of the same age in these other art forms and that we could form a kind of multi-arts community. So, you know, a few of us were closer in touch with things going on in the music world, in the dance world, in the theater world, etc., and those people came to our readings and were interested in our texts to some extent. But that was hard to sustain, it didn't really last, and after a while it became clear that whatever interest some of us had, or that I had, for instance, in these other fields, was not going to result in our work getting any kind of outreach. The outreach was likely to come from the poetry world.

So the literary activity became more ensconced or territorialized as poetry, and then beyond that I got more involved in the downtown art scene, partly through collaborations in the dance world with Sally Silvers — who became my romantic partner in the late 1970s and who I started to compose music for; I became involved in the “free improv” music world, became involved in the experimental theatre world to some extent — Sally and I, with Tom Cora started a performance group called BARKING<sup>580</sup> in the very early 1980s and we did small scale and a few very large scale multi-media performance pieces on political topics. So, in a sense, right around the time that ‘Language Writing’ became an item in the literary world, I started to extend my own text-based efforts out into these other fields. So my involvement with the downtown arts scene, in a weird way, occurs right as the Language Writing community solidifies itself and becomes more and more intensively literary. And then I start to move out a little bit and continue my involvement with those communities — excitedly, because I’m in New York City. I mean, this wouldn’t have been possible if I had gotten a job at, say, the University of Oklahoma, or if I had gone out in the Midwest somewhere. There were really only a few places that had lively enough scenes in these other fields that could have sustained that kind of activity, and not just have it be ‘in the mail’. The thing about the in-the-mail, correspondence-based quality of the Language Writing in the 70s was that you could then do it anywhere. You could be involved with these other poets without having to be in a town or a city in which there were lots of other lively things going on. I mean, the other

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<sup>580</sup> For more information on Andrews’s collaboration with choreographer and dancer Sally Silvers and their collective multimedia performance practice since the 1980s read Erica Kaufmann’s “10 Questions for Bruce Andrews and Sally Silvers” on [poetryproject.org](http://poetryproject.org).

two major places where the so-called Language Poets collected were in NYC and the Bay Area in California. And, I think, the thing that was striking about NYC was that it really was the only place that I would venture to say in the US, at the time, where all of the art forms that were operating were at a cutting edge, and had a national scope of interest.

**DB:** Would you say that your then dislike for the P-word as opposed to the L-word stems from your sense of poetry as an institution and the fact that there had been a disconnect from these other fields of art?

**BA:** Well, I don't know whether it being an institution was as much the problem as the second thing you mention — the disconnection with other fields. It was more that it was isolationist rather than it was institutionalized. And not only that it was isolated from other art forms but that it was the most reactionary, perhaps, of them all. Most people wouldn't even have considered it an art form in the same way they would these others. But it was maybe the only art form where you could continue to be acclaimed for doing work that could easily have been done 50 years before. That would have been unheard of in theatre, in music, in dance, or in the visual arts, for sure. So it was a uniquely conservative, or, reactionary field, I would say. And that was the problem for some of us.

**DB:** In 2006, you made an appearance on Fox News's The O'Reilly Factor, under the rubric "Outrage of the Week," and Bill O'Reilly basically charged you with indoctrination of undergraduates at Fordham University. Now, was that your first appearance as a "far left guy" in the US corporate media? And, given the fact that you were not invited as a poet, would you say that there is a connection, still, between what you do as a political scientist — teaching "International Politics" at Fordham — and your critical poetics?

**BA:** Okay. In late 2006 when I was asked on this right-wing talk show, the O'Reilly Factor, yes, that was the first time I've been on national television, in fact. I was being baited as a critic of American foreign policy, I think, partly because I am teaching at a Jesuit University and the show's host, Bill O'Reilly, is a right-wing Catholic, so he takes particular 'responsibility' almost for what goes on in the Catholic college system. In other words, if I had been teaching at Columbia, the New School, or NYU, I don't think ... it would have been more predictable for him and he wouldn't have been surprised that some secular progressive was out there teaching works critical of American imperialism, and it was partly [because] I assigned the book *The Five Biggest Lies that George W. Bush Told Us About Iraq* in my

classes and that it was required reading. And he was also trying to get me to, in a sense, come out on national television as a far-left person, which I declined to do. And his staff hadn't informed him that I was also much better known as a poet even though apparently one of my former students was an intern, I think, at Fox News and basically turned me in, hoping to get on the show and attack me for being a horrible, as you say, "indoctrinator" of innocent youth. But the book that I assigned, as I explained on the show – oh, by the way the show, as a video, is up on YouTube, and I transcribed the interview for a transcription journal that a couple of young poet-scholars were putting out, and that transcript is up online also.

Anyway, the book that I was using I used to try to investigate the rhetoric and, as I put it on the show, the justificatory efforts of government at trying to sell its policies and inspire what I've later come to call national security judgment on the part of the public. So I wasn't assigning the book as a way to help the students explain why the policy was the way it was. It wasn't a normative issue for me, I wasn't trying to convince people that the war was bad and that therefore they should have a different view about the war. I was trying to get them to understand the way the government explained itself. Now, the connection between that, the specifics of that, and what you're asking about as my critical poetics are *a little* complicated. My efforts in school, and as a scholar, from the early 1970s on, when I started graduate school, were focused on the explanation of aggressive foreign policy by the United States. So I did my doctoral dissertation on alternative explanations of the US escalation of the war in Vietnam and its refusal to withdraw in the 1960s. Most of my scholarly work was on *why* the government did what it did; it was about the explanation of policy. That later shifted, especially in the classroom, to getting more and more interested in the role of the public and the role of public opinion as an enabling factor. So there was a slight shift from explanation to issues about preconditions, because I'm interested in what would need to be changed before the policy could change. Before I thought of that mostly in terms of structural change at the level of the political economy but then, as I got more interested in the facilitating role of both the media and the public, I started to focus on the government's rhetoric and not so much on what was actually driving it, or motivating it.

So, the parallel with my thinking about poetics, I think, is also *oddly* apparent, which is a shift from thinking about issues of production, which are closer to questions about explanation, in let's say so-called Language Writing. So, the texts in my first big collection of essays, *Paradise & Method: Poetics & Praxis*, mostly deal with matters of production — to try to differentiate or discuss what's distinctive about this experimental or radical poetry. But

mostly, when I'm saying production, I mean from the point of view of the author in a sense — what is driving and motivating it, and that's a little bit closer to talking about, with regard to government, what would explain government policy. So when I shift in talking about foreign policy more toward public opinion, I shift also in my thinking about poetics toward thinking more about the reader — and the whole notion of reception. If I have a prescription, then, for the writing, it would be a prescription that points to a different possible role for the reader — and that is what has been occupying my thinking in the last couple of years. So there is this odd parallel, I think, between those two things, that has always been there, but now it's a little more pointed.

**DB:** You mentioned your collection of essays, *Paradise & Method: Poetics & Praxis*, so ... you conceive of your poetry as "praxis," right? In the particular Marxian sense of practical-critical, "human sensuous activity" that is in one way or another directed towards "revolutionary change?" Can you tell us in how far your notion of praxis differs from what is frequently called a 'vulgar Marxist' position? And how significant is the role played by neo-Marxist theorists like Adorno and Debord, and post/structuralist thinkers such as (the late) Barthes, or Baudrillard, for instance, to the development of your notion of "poetry as praxis"?<sup>581</sup>

**BA:** Well, if I think of the creation of this writing as sensuous, that's hard to avoid. If you think of it as practical in terms of being based on action, then, that's hard to avoid. If you think of "critical" as theoretically securely grounded, then, that's probably going too far. If you think of critical as self-reflective, skeptical, suspicious, operating on some meta-level, then, yeah, I think of it as critical in that sense. But then, most poetry writing might be. So if I'm trying to think of what poetry, or what literature, wouldn't be a praxis, then: it's not things that wouldn't be critical-practical and sensuous, it would be things that wouldn't be directed toward revolutionary change. I think that, in some people's eyes, the relationship to theory and the relationship to hopes of revolutionary change would differentiate what some of us were trying to do. But I don't know if they're right! Because to say that we, or that I am, dedicated in my writing to push things toward revolutionary change ... it's pretty difficult in my life time to even *imagine* what revolutionary change would look like in an advanced

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<sup>581</sup> I am referring here to Andrews's "Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis," *Paradise & Method: Poetics & Praxis* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1996), 49-71. The essay is also included in Charles Bernstein's edition of *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy* (New York: Roof, 1990), 23-44.

capitalist society. So if any of us, or me, said that that's what we are driving toward, I think, people would just laugh, you know, they would say "Who are you kidding? What possible way could your work create revolutionary change?" So that ends up being, I think, *complicated*.

The other part, the *theory* part ... now maybe this has some interest. One of the ways that the so-called Language Writers were condemned by people who weren't interested in our work was by them using the claim that our work was simply derived from our theories, that we came into the literary realm with a set of literary, or worse, political theories about how things should be and that we just did the work that followed directly from those theories. And I don't remember anybody who that would be a decent description of. Some of us, especially during the mid-70s onward, were involved in essay writing and giving talks and presentations that involved fairly hifalutin theoretical investments. But the poetry writing came first, and came earlier. In a sense the theorizing was a way for us to understand what we were doing and what we all were involved with, and how it fit into existing frameworks of thought. But it wasn't as though the frameworks of thought came first, and then we squeezed the poetry out of that.

**DB:** That is pretty much how I understand the notion of a 'theory-praxis' dialectic.

**BA:** There would be theorizing after the action, and the theory might then inform some future modifications of the action. Yes, I mean, some of that would be going on. Though, I guess, I'm wondering whether theorizing about political and social matters would turn around later and directly affect the writing. I'm not sure. That may be too big a claim. Now, a couple of other things that you asked about ... How my notion of praxis would differ from ... and, I think, two things are different here. One, how it would differ from let us say a "vulgar Marxist" position, and also how it might differ from what typically gets called "political art", or political poetry. On the first one, the vulgar Marxist view, I think there is an intertwinement with the old debate about the base and the superstructure.

**DB:** Different models of mediation —

**BA:** Yeah. The vulgar Marxist model might be ... I'm not sure exactly since that is a polemical term. In other words, I'm not sure anybody would admit to being a vulgar Marxist — maybe Žižek from time to time might, but it's fairly rare these days. It would be used by people who thought they were beyond that by saying "Oh these vulgar Marxist they just think about change operating at the workplace." Which would mean there has to be structural change in the nature of the economic order, and then everything else would follow from that.

That would give certain kinds of tasks to the poets — that their real focus should be on transforming the capitalist system rather than just focusing on some cultural or superstructural matters. I think the later, more sophisticated Western Marxist positions assume that the base and the superstructure are intertwined, that they have a reciprocal effect on each other — and as soon as you say that, then working *in* the superstructure all of a sudden becomes a possibility, becomes okay, becomes a way to contribute to social change, and it is not just about trying to encourage strikers at the point of production or something. So, I think, that move away from vulgar Marxism did allow cultural work to go on that didn't always have to be subordinated to the party or to some worker faction, or interest group, let's say.

Now, the “political art” issue ... there, I think, the standard lines that we were all getting surrounded by in the 1970s — at least when the so-called Language Writers who were mostly ‘baby boomers’ born in the first decade after WWII, which meant that we came of age as functioning artists in the early to mid-1970s, in our mid-20s — that when we were, in a sense, hitting the scene, or, coming into some kind of early maturity, we were essentially being told that to be political in your writing meant either to mobilize an existing community, or, to try to create a constituency by means of identification. And we didn’t accept that. We thought of the existing constituencies as a problem, in a sense, and we thought of the existing network of identities as a problem. In that sense, we didn’t want to just create the converted, or preach to the converted — as you ask about later in your questions. So that sort of put us in this box: on the one hand, we were willing to operate in a marginally superstructural way, but we also wanted to get beyond those existing identity structures. Now, then you asked about what you call “neo-Marxist theorists like Adorno and Debord.” Well, Adorno and Debord, I think, would both acknowledge, like most of the European Marxist tradition, the importance of the superstructure as being a crucial feature in the reproduction of capital, so they would be differentiated from this vulgar Marxist position pretty clearly. And that would also be true of people like Barthes, who I am more familiar with, Baudrillard I don’t really want to say anything much about.

The other issue, I think, both Adorno and Debord also would focus on and be dissatisfied with is the existing political structure of identities, in the conjuncture we are in. They both would have a problem with the more traditional sense of political art — where you are either relying on existing identities, or you are trying to firm them up so that they would be repositionable. I think they both realized that the existing identity structure that you might in an old-fashioned political art be trying to appeal to was, in fact, the problem, and that you had

to figure out a way to get around that. So that part of Adorno and Debord, I think, would be relevant to my interest. Debord was somebody that had a huge influence on me right around the time that I was starting to write — reading him in the wake of Paris 68, where I got a little dose of that from being in Paris during that period. So he was somebody I was interested in all along. Adorno I have come to more recently.

**DB:** You differentiate between the thematic and formal politics of writing, calling for a poetry not about, but as politics. And you have repeatedly described your work, to the surprise of some, as coming out of a Brechtian tradition of ‘targeting the audience’ and adapting Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* to avant-garde writing — which at times you underline by such self-referential comments on method as: “Stake thru heart kills most vampirish tendencies of audience.” Do you still assert that the politics of a poem, or literary text, hinge on how it positions its readers vis-à-vis the writer, the social, and language itself?

**BA:** Yes [laughs], I would assert that. A couple of interesting questions here. When you talk about the difference between thematic and formal politics of writing, “calling for a poetry not about, but as politics” — *these days* I am rethinking all of that in terms of the relationship of the text to the *reader*. So, a thematic emphasis in the writing: I’m going to then wonder, well, what does that do for the reader? And the same thing when you are talking about form: the formal aspects of a work — if we think of “formal” in a broader sense to involve process and the operations of it — then I think that’s even easier to immediately see it in relationship to the reader. The reader is, in other words, almost automatically enmeshed in the operations of the writing, whereas the reader’s relationship to the thematic, the thematics of the writing, is not automatic in that sense. It was always possible for writers to claim that their work was political because it touched on political themes. But it was never clear to me that those political themes had any relevant impact on the reader. And, if you think of form, of the formal work of the text, then you have the same problem. I think people will often be inordinately proud of, for instance, the formal innovations of their textual work. It’s not clear to me that ... well, what is clear to me is that *some* formally innovative aspects of the writing *would* directly implicate the reader, others would *not*. That is why I think we need to think about not so much an opposition between thematic and formal as an opposition between thematic and almost *relational*, or operational, application-oriented qualities of the process that goes into the text.

**DB:** So when you are writing or composing do you use yourself as a ‘surrogate’ for the reader?

**BA:** I have to, in a sense. I mean, as I have said before in interviews, I am the first reader of my texts and I think of writing significantly in terms of editing rather than transcribing my emotional epiphanies of vision, of spirit, or whatever. If I think of them as editing, then I need criteria to decide when something is right or not, when it is working or not, what it needs extra or what it needs less of, when I’m doing that and I’m editing as a reader. It’s not as though I’m saying, “Oh I appreciate this phrase but I am going to imagine myself as someone else and try to decide what that someone else would appreciate.” It’s very tough to do that. And it may be that my unwillingness to do that means that I’m still much more locked into authorial expressivity than I usually think I am. So, yeah, I do start out as the surrogate, or as a version of ‘an’ ideal reader, or the reader that I’m able to imagine.

The other thing in your question — the “Brechtian tradition of *targeting* the audience” — you know, “targeting” is a troubling word. And I’m wondering if it is a synonym for a broader range of words or in what kind of way you mean targeting — what ... I got a gun and it is aimed at you ... in that sense. Like “targeting” instead of what?

**DB:** Well, instead of ... offering a narrative discourse, a narrative proposition, probably?

**BA:** Right, now, I am agreeing with this general line here. It is just that I was worrying over these terms —

**DB:** *targeting* —

**BA:** Yes, targeting. Again, it is a little bit like “avant-garde”, you know, it has this military connotation —

**DB:** Metaphors of war —

**BA:** Yes. And the same thing with even “how the language positions its reader” ... I think we are talking about an *invitation* here, rather than an assault! I think that is the case. There is a specific invitation to the reader that is wrapped up with more than just the thematics, and more than just the reference system of the poem, that is wrapped up with how the work actually functions when it is being read. So that, I would agree, it has this politics embedded in it.

**DB:** I like the notion of invitation. As a reader, I feel very much “invited,” although sometimes I have to decline the offer, obviously, due to lack of time or capacity ... but I am picking the texts up again and again, and return.

**BA:** But I think you're right, even the notion of invitation would have to be made very much more specific. Because anybody, any writer could say that. But, I think, it's the specifics of the invitation. What kind of a party are we getting invited to?

**DB:** In a highly influential essay of yours, you talk about a "V-Effect to combat the obvious" — oh, metaphors of war, again — and how this "points to a look at language as medium [...]." <sup>582</sup> Can you talk a bit about the process and potential difficulties of adapting Brechtian poetics from theatre to avant-garde writing?

**BA:** Again, a very big set of issues there. The question about language as medium I am curious about. Because I don't think language *is* "a medium." But what better term for it —

**DB:** Practical consciousness? —

**BA:** — we could come up with, I'm not really sure. In other words, it seems too osmotically infiltrating to have the quality of a medium, something that is separate from us, that operates like some kind of filtering system, some mediating device. We are much more embedded in it, on the one hand. And to me that brings up these issues about the reader. You cannot create some structural wonder, some innovative structure out of language, and then simply expect that to be enough. If you think of it not as a medium but as a landscape or plane on which the reader and the writer are both interacting — or more like city planning, or architecture — then you are re-envisioning something that includes both parts of the equation, of reader and writer. So it is the *obvious* elements of the *interaction* that would have to be exposed and combated, not so much just having the writer off on her own, tinkering with the language, and then presenting that to a reader as a transform of the medium that is somehow supposed to ... where the text is doing all the work. I think that the work is done in this interrelationship between the reader and the writer. That is where the work is happening. And the text is basically setting up that ... setting the stage for that. The writing is a kind of *mise-en-scène* for this drama to unfold, when the drama is taking place between the stage and the audience, not just up on stage.

What I think about Brecht? If you go back and look at his essays on the theatre from the 20s and 30s — and by the way, I use this book [*Brecht on Theatre*] in class, I have used it for decades now in courses on Politics and Communication, the John Willett edition of Brecht's

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<sup>582</sup> Ibid. 50.

essays<sup>583</sup> — now, my suspicion is that there is a ton of other essay material by Brecht that's never been translated and that we do not really have access to here in the US, and I think this is a pretty good selection of Brecht's major works in the essay/talk format, but I'm not even sure of that. So I do not want to make any huge pronouncements about Brecht — plus, for instance, I don't have any German. Or, as perhaps it should be put: "I don't have any German so I gotta shut up" and not make any big pronouncements about Brecht beyond what is in that one fairly decent sized collection of essays. When I use that book in class, one thing that I do notice, or my students notice, too, is how much Brecht has bought into this now largely discredited, or considered old-fashioned view about science, and about manipulative control, and about mechanism. And some of that, I think, is closer to a more narrow formalist view of the text. As if the writer is a kind of scientific engineer, able to create these structures, and to control everything that happens as a result — as if in some kind of controlled experiment. That image of science, partly because of what happens in WW2, gets discredited, and then some of that — and then gender politics plays into this, too — so, Brecht has this macho, scientific, Leninist view about politics and ... *some* of that bleeds into his theories about the theatre, which, I think, I probably before I started to so strenuously, or so ostentatiously, foreground the position of the reader, I probably would have been more accepting of than I am now. Some of that ... the same thing that I mentioned in your notion about "targeting" — there's an element of that in Brecht.

**DB:** So, the *Lehrstücke*, for instance, probably for you would go too far, be too didactic, leave a limited space for the reader? —

**BA:** — Well, didactics is an interesting issue, I think.

**DB:** What type of didactics, or didacticism?

**BA:** There is some spectrum between "didactic" and "preaching to the converted," both of which I find unsatisfying because they are dealing with fairly fixed entities that they somehow think that they can control, where the issue then becomes control. When I think about control, in the Brechtian sense, the first other theorist that quickly comes to mind would be Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, and, I think, the game that we are in now is much closer to the invitation to discipline and self-discipline than it is to the early part of *Discipline and Punish*, which I just assigned to my classes this week and which starts out with this image of a person being executed and having their limbs torn off them. So, if that's the issue, if that's the

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<sup>583</sup> The essay collection Andrews has used privately and in the classroom is *Brecht On Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).

paradigm for the reader, then I'm really nervous, right?! To me that's *real* "targeting," you know, where you tear the limbs off and kill them and then burn them up, etc.

**DB:** That's targeting?

**BA:** [laughs] That would be the *bad* kind of targeting!

**DB:** Bruce, you have a reputation for being "difficult" — a writer who produces "difficult" texts. Thinking of your writing from the early 70s, I see a textual politics at work in the writing that aspires — correct me if I'm wrong — to re-aestheticize the word by suspending or frustrating reference and opening up the text for alternative ways of creating meaning. To me as a reader those texts are very challenging but at the same time they are offering great pleasure. As a theorist who is sympathetic towards a certain aesthetico-political paradigm from the start, I end up writing things like "Andrews's is a genuinely materialistic and performative poetics that uses intransitivity as a means to direct our attention to the body as the site of language production, use, and reception. Such awareness might very well be the precondition for any critical re-meaning, i.e. an alternative semanticizing critically aware of and resisting the dominant modes of reality formatting in and through language. Or rather, by means of a specific use of language that like capital actively erases all traces of its material production and pretends to exist independently of and unaffected by human bodies." I know this is a bold claim, of course. What do you think?

**BA:** Having a "reputation for being difficult" ... well, one thing I should mention: I have over the years, especially in the 70s and 80s, also acquired a reputation for being difficult as a person — pissing people off, generally being intransigent, hard-ass, and troublesome, and, you know, in some way insensitive to various underlying social texts, etc. —

**DB:** no —

**BA:** — yeah, maybe I've mellowed a little bit over the years. Anyway, what about "producing difficult texts?" I mean, ... that interests me, the notion of difficult, because I think a lot of what seems difficult to people in so-called poetry are texts that divert so drastically from the familiar literary traditions. I always notice that if I'm giving readings, let's say, in a school or college, or high school or graduate school, that the more training people have in the poetry tradition, and the normative mainstream heritage of poetry, the more difficult they find the work that I do. The less so, the less: if there's an audience of people who haven't already been trained and socialized to think about poetry in a certain way, who will be able to see that the

language I'm using, the vocabulary I'm using, the lexicons I'm working with, and the methods of putting words together, the syntactical relationships, the lack of identifiable narrative, or the lack of identifiable author position that's stable, all of that they are *completely* familiar with from the street, from the cultural landscape that they're all involved in now, in a postmodern world. The difficulty appears differently from different institutional vantage points for people when they're coming at this as a reader. Again, for me to then make big, universal, sweeping generalizations about the reader is clearly stupid because it ignores the need to do that finely grained contextualizing, which, in some ways, I haven't gotten around to yet, in my theorizing. And this goes back again to what I was saying about so-called Language Writing, and about genre. Difficulty is often defined in a relationship to an existing genre — like *that* artwork is difficult because it doesn't fit the traditions of easel painting, let's say, or some piece of installation art does not fit the traditions of sculpture as we are used to it, etc. So that those things then *don't fit*.

When you talk about "re-aestheticizing the word" ... again, that's an interesting phrase, because it really is about, to me, opening up the capacity of the reader. That is one of my pet terms these days — *capacitation* for the reader. That is something I'm interested in and that often involves re-aesthetizing, so that "re-aestheticizing the word" means taking it out of its familiar institutional contexts, not letting it be sublated in that way — the term you were using before.

**DB:** So that it becomes more than just a trigger, or signal — like, look at the feel and smell, almost, of it?

**BA:** Yes. It is a way of upholding the particularity, of the word, of language, and that *is* a kind of aestheticizing in the classical sense. Instead of letting it be imprinted or interpellated by literary institutions. I think of Althusser, who was interesting to me in my political science theorizing, as theorizing about what's in the way of social change — his whole notion of structural ... mobile, flexible structuring of capital. But here, if I'm talking about trying to protect the particularities of language and not let them be simply steamrollered by the institutional framework, that steamrolling is close to what Althusser is talking about as interpellation. The hailing process, you know — the example I always use in class is: you're walking down the street, you hear from behind you somebody say "Hey, fuckhead! Yo! Fuckhead!" ... and you turn around. And it's the moment of turning around where you are being interpellated. That, I think, is what "re-aestheticizing" works against. And, again, my emphasis on the reader, and on capacitating the reader, is also absolutely related to a notion of

pleasure. The capacitation of the reader creates pleasure, pleasure comes through that increasing capacity. That's one thing Brecht talks about, you know, that what creates pleasure is the experience of the work being made, is the making of the work — it's the learning that's pleasurable, not so much the piling up of thematic information. So, all those things you're saying make sense to me.

When you are talking about a materialistic and performative poetics ... well, the performative part would come directly out of this emphasis on the role, or the position, of the reader. The materialistic part would come from my emphasis, in thinking about time and space, on matter, on noise, on what's in the way of ... for instance, how the atomized, or the atomic level, the micro-scale level of language, is what's in the way — acting as a kind of material noise or obstruction to normative grammar. I think about, let's say, the sound and visual appearance of text — the so-called material signifier — as being the matter that is in the way of transparent reference. So if it is materialistic as different from transparently referential, normatively grammatical work, then yeah, I think, that's actually what is going on. Poetry always prides itself *in general* on its attention to less rigidly normative grammatical phraseology and its attention to the sound and the look of the text. But I think the kind of poetry that I've been involved with goes even further in trying to push that pretty far out — but not all the way. And this is another distinction I've made before: You could completely ignore any syntax whatsoever, and you could completely ignore any reference at all. But then, I think, you are not really able to engage in a certain kind of negotiating process for the reader. In other words, if the reader doesn't even have a chance to deal with the semantic level, or doesn't really have a chance to deal with anything that coordinates and organizes time through connections between words in a temporal horizon, or temporal spectrum, then you're missing opportunities for re-capacitating the reader, along those lines. So I *am* interested in those things ...

When you're talking about intransitivity, there I'm not sure what you mean.

**DB:** Craig Dworkin was using the term in his encyclopedia article. And I think it comes straight from Barthes, who in "To Write: An Intransitive Verb" (1966) conceives of writing as an intransitive act, a condition in which the writing subject disperses into an irretrievable contemporaneity with their practice and the work of signification is refigured as a kind of *spasm* that convulses the surface of language and affects the reader in turn, rather than asking to be decoded and thus reinstate the "transitive" dimension of the message. In other words: a

kind of writing that needs no object and would thus aid this process of re-aestheticizing language.

**BA:** That phrase might be interesting to work on, seriously, as a way to think through some of these things, because it might mean ... you are creating attention to the text; *you* talk about creating attention to the *body* as the site of language production. Do you mean the body of the reader, or the body of the text?

**DB:** I was thinking of the body of the reader.

**BA:** Well, as long as “intransitivity” doesn’t imply the text closed off on its own, that somehow, would not allow for this operation in the reader, then I’m interested in it, then it’s closer to something that creates what Kant talks about as lingering, this lingering possibility. But it’s a lingering possibility for the reader. That it’s there to work your way through, which then makes the attention to the body go both ways — it’s the body of the text as well as the body of the reader. And “body” as in the fully flowering capacities of the reader, the possibilities for the reader.

**DB:** I was also thinking about the simple fact that without human bodies there is no language.

**BA:** Right. On the big scale that would be true. So you were talking about an “alternative semanticizing” ... that seems straight ahead, a pretty accurate comment. “Resisting the dominant modes of reality formatting in and through language” ... yeah, I can see myself interested in those things in terms of the reader’s capacity. One thing you cut from your earlier question which I didn’t understand at first, but then I could see a way of ... where you said “by means of a specific use of language that like Capital actively erases all traces of its material production and pretends to exist independently of and unaffected by human bodies” ... it seems to me that *that* specific use of language is the dominant mode of reality!

**DB:** Exactly.

**BA:** Yeah, and I think that really captures the precise opposite of what I’m interested in doing. If I’m interested in uncreasing the traces of material production then I’m interested in undercutting any pretension to be able to exist independently of and unaffected by human *readers*. So I think that part of your question you could have left in. Bring it back in.

**DB:** I will! I was just afraid of the question getting too long, of me talking too much.

**BA:** Look, I mean, the larger backdrop of some of your questions is what “Capital with a capital C” is doing. I mean, I have been, as a scholar, interested in and influenced by the so-called ‘capital-logic’ school coming out of Germany — German scholars — that had been interested in trying to trace out the broad reproduction requirements of capital accumulation

on a world scale, you know, and trying to figure out “what would the logic of Capital normally point to?” And if I think about it in terms of a kind of allegory of the reader then, yeah, what you’re saying makes perfect sense. Those are quite helpful comments.

**DB:** It is often said that the central idea of a language-centered poetics has been to foreground the production of meaning by means of experimental writing that stresses the ‘materiality of the signifier’ and explores the ‘politics of the referent.’ Now, to alter consciousness by disrupting language has always been the dream of a politicized avant-garde. So maybe you can go a bit into how your approach differs from avant-garde precursors such as surrealism, or Russian futurism and constructivism? I am thinking, in particular, of the “concentric circles” model you put forth in “Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis”; of confronting language both in terms of a system of signs and as discourse/ideology in your writing.

**BA:** It’s probably unfair to say this phrase “the central idea of a language-centered poetics.” I don’t think you would get an agreement on what *the* central idea is. But anyway, part of the project was, as we said, to foreground the production of meaning. As I just said before, I’m more thinking of the production of meaning as a team effort that involves the reader, and also involves the unproduction, in a sense, or the challenging of certain types of meanings and then foregrounding other types of meanings which might be left once those other meanings are cancelled, or attacked, or targeted, as you put it before. So that means the production of meaning becomes more complicated. There’s no longer the relay model — author knows what she means and is transmitting that to the reader. It’s clear that the text is actually producing the meaning, the meaning wasn’t there beforehand. But it is also true that it’s not just the text that’s producing it, it’s also the reader’s involvement, too. So, if I always stress the materiality of the signifier, or the politics of the referent, as you’re putting it, then *now* I would think of that as related to opening up some negotiating possibilities for the reader. *That’s* what’s interesting about the materiality of the signifier. Not just the fact that you have opaque texts, or beautiful, or fascinating looking texts, or fascinating sounding texts. It’s having some relationship to the experience of the reader. And the same with, if you think about the politics of the referent, if you think about the referent being politicizable, that would suggest, again, showing how it’s constructed, showing what’s missing, showing what’s excluded, showing how the references of language are distributed, you know, in Rancièrean terms, etc. so all that, I think, makes sense.

When you say “to alter consciousness by disrupting language” – yeah! But whose consciousness? For me it’s the writer/reader combine, you know, it’s not just “I’m gonna alter my *own* consciousness” by disrupting language — there are probably easier pharmaceutical methods for that, or, since we were both at the Merzbow concert last night, you know, some kind of sound amplification might be easier than having a language at all! Talking about avant-garde precursors – I think it’s interesting in regard to the so-called Language Writers and not just me. Because one of the things we did take credit for, and got credit for, was introducing various avant-garde traditions of literature into the contemporary poetry scene, where some of those, especially European traditions of the most radical sort, Dada and the Russians in particular, really had been neglected. They were just historical museum pieces, really, that weren’t part of what people thought poetics might do. Same thing with our interest in sound poetry, our interest in visual poetry, concrete poetry, all that was, in a way, part of what was available to us coming of age in the early 1970s. And all that stuff was now much more widely available than it had been even ten years before. There were tremendous advantages that people in my age bracket had when we started writing. So the people that are now, say, ten years older than us, that are now in their early seventies, let’s say, or their mid-70s, *they didn’t* have that when they were in their twenties, trying to gather together their possibilities. So, we had that available to us and because most of us weren’t coming out of creative writing programs, or graduate literary programs, we didn’t have any reason to reject those as lively possibilities to put in the mix.

Specifically about the Russian Futurists and Constructivists, I mean, the Russian Futurists — Khlebnikov and a few others who we were able to read in translation at that point — I think had influenced mostly — and I’d say this later about Cage and his circle as well — mostly had an influence on us, I’d say, or maybe just for myself, because of the *results*. I don’t think many of us, maybe Barry Watten might be an exception, but I don’t think many of us had a full grounding in the theoretical basis for what the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian writers were doing, but the concrete results of it were striking and easily attractive to us. The Surrealists are a slightly different issue here. And I think, there was a sense that ... I mean, I’m very interested and invested in thinking about time and space as spectra — as spectra of openness and closure. So I’m interested in how, for instance, grammatical normative syntax will perform a closure on time, in the same way that narrative does, so that a narrative you could even think of as a giant grammar of temporal closure. Neither of those were things that I wanted to sign on to, sign up with — the commitments to normative grammar, or the

commitments to narrative on the time spectrum. On the spatial spectrum, then, we're talking about referentiality, at the micro-level, and on the expressivity of the author, and the representational pull away from the text, the focus on things that aren't present — as with the creation of illusion or fiction — as closure on the vertical or spatial spectrum at a macro level. If I look at the Surrealists, *there is* a rejection of spatial closure because of their commitment to drastic juxtapositions of representational materials. But it's still fairly mechanical, in some respects. And on the time line, the time spectrum, it's much more conservative. They're using traditional grammatical structures to give you some disruption of the spatial plane ... but even that gets mechanical. So that never really went as far as a number of us wanted it to go. Well, there were a couple of people in the Language group that had some prior background in being influenced by the Surrealists, but I wasn't one of them.

Now, on the concentric circle model you mention ... what I just was saying about time and space ... my current way of sizing this up is to think about it in micro and macro terms. If I think of, let's say, grammar being the micro/horizontal part, I think of narrative, maybe, or anything that would create a single point — simultaneity, I think, narrative is a curious approximation of — would be the macro version of temporal closure. On the spatial plane, micro closure would have to do with transparent referentiality. On the larger plane it would have to do with, as I was saying before, the representation pulling the reader out to a clearly deposited representational schema, or to pull it out into the illusionistic space of the author. That's how I *lately* have been thinking about this ... where the micro dimensions are the raw materials of the text, and the macro dimensions have to do with the product, have to do *in particular* with the product as it affects the *reader*, as it affects *subjectivity*, the creation of a subject position, or the reinforcement of a subject position. So, now when I look back at these concentric circles, the models from that piece, which is from a long time ago — I was thinking of the inner circle as being the sign system, and the outer circle as being discourse and ideology — that has some affinity to this micro/macro distinction ... so that the sign system might be related to the micro dimension, and discourse and ideology, *as they affect the reader* or the creation of the subject, would have to do with this macro dimension. If I get around to getting these current ideas a little bit more laid out that'll probably be clearer ... then you can see how this micro/macro distinction is what I had previously talked about as a series of concentric circles.

**DB:** In the 1980s the units of composition in your poems began to include larger, more syntactically coherent phrases as well as the kind of confrontational samples of social discourse that would characterize *Give Em Enough Rope* and *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up*, where the disjunctive and irreconcilable contexts of the phrases — that we are all somehow familiar with — very much “underscore,” as Dworkin writes, “the forms of psychosocial constructions that language enables and enacts.” Would you say that you are working to increase the performativity of the text and to project social antagonisms into the reading experience?

**BA:** Yes. I'd say that. But let me go back to a few things that you've said ...

The units of composition of my poems beginning to get larger, more syntactically coherent, and to incorporate these samplings from social discourse — that begins in the late 1970s. And it's pretty coincident with me coming to NYC, becoming part of a poetry community, and starting to give readings in public, which I had not done before. And to have that starting to influence what I chose to first select to read, at these readings, and then, second, that began to influence what I wrote. So some of that is a situationally based thing, and maybe it also had to do with changes in the culture. Plenty of things were happening in the late 70s here in NYC that would have pointed me in that direction anyways if I wanted to engage social materials. So it started a little bit earlier than the 1980s even though the work may have been published in the 80s mostly; I mean, *Give Em Enough Rope* is from 78 to 82, I think, *I Don't Have Any Paper* was written in 83 and edited in the beginning of 84, even though it didn't come out in book form until many years later. The phrase “more syntactically coherent” ... I might say “syntactically imaginable.” Because I think many people would doubt how syntactically coherent these things are. One thing I got interested in was to create a phrase-like or sentence-like linkage of words that *wouldn't* have any familiar syntax to it but partly because of the voice trajectory of it, especially when spoken, it would carry that charge — that would seem as though you could put it into some imaginable grammar or syntax but it wasn't copying or relying on one that preexisted it. Second, this notion about incorporating confrontational and controversial “samples” of social discourse: the sampling issue is interesting. Sampling, for instance, in the music world, in the hip hop scene, for instance, was also beginning to be a major issue right around that time. And a lot of my work from that period looks much more, sounds much more, like it is involved with sampling, and appropriation, whereas in fact a lot of it isn't. There is a quality of appropriated language that I liked and was drawn toward, and I

often wanted to replicate it without actually sampling anything. So rather than what, say, the Flarf collective does with doing Google appropriations and samplings from Google searches and things, it was more as if I was seeing things that deserved to have that treatment and then came up with my own slightly different versions. Most of the time. There's a few things which clearly are just, you know, beyond the level of vocabulary, to come directly out of something I might have heard and I just wrote down — like the title of my new book *You Can't Have Everything ... Where Would You Put It!*: that's a classic bumper sticker/t-shirt phrase, it's not one that I came up with myself. But a lot of the earlier work had that quality to it. So the impression may be “this is sampling,” “this is transcription,” “this is ...” – and it may *not* be.

Now, this last thing you're asking about — “disjunctive and irreconcilable contexts” — *that* interests me as a way of wording it because I feel like when it comes to the context of phrases, or even the contexts of vocabulary choices, that that's often ignored, or presupposed, or involved with some hegemonic determination, or delimitation, of what the appropriate context is. So, I wanna challenge that ignoring of context, I wanna challenge that presupposing of context, and I wanna challenge that hegemonic control over context. And one way I found that that can happen is through *challenging* those *norms*. If I'm putting things together that are irreconcilable and disjunctive — it will make it harder to ignore, harder to presuppose, harder just to embrace the hegemonic form of contextualization. So I think that was an interesting way you put that, or Craig put it. And that would then ... if you're making people, writer and reader, more aware of the actual, no longer ignored, no longer presupposed, no longer complicit *contexts* then — if you actually get to the *real* contexts of this language — it *is* contested, and it *does* embody social antagonism, so that you would be able to *project* social antagonisms in the text work precisely by playing with the way that the language is contextualized.

**DB:** Dworkin also notes that your “turn from the micro-text level of the sign towards the macro-text level of discourse” was accompanied by significant changes in your compositional method as well. Can you give us a broad idea of how you actually compose, or edit, texts today?

**BA:** At some point in the late 70s — as I've said to many people and on interviews before<sup>584</sup>

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<sup>584</sup> Most recently in a 2010 interview with Dan Thomas-Glass, published in *The Argostist Online*.

— I bought a paper cutter, which was the major technological shift in my work, much more significant than word processors, for instance. All my work since ... yeah, basically in the last 30 years now, has been composed on small pieces of paper — 8.5/11" sheets of paper cut into 6. Everything I write, pretty much — essays, shopping lists, phone numbers, things I need to do, as well as poetry that I collect and create — is all done on that size. Which in terms of Craig's point, I think, has some interest. When he's talking about the shift from this more atomized, microscopically investigative, small bits of material to working with phrases, working with longer units ... it has some resonance with this partly because the thing that working with small pieces of paper, and doing all my composing on this, and then storing them, basically, and then pulling boxes out — these are all stored in wine case boxes here in the house — which I fill up maybe one a year with, you know, thousands of these cards ... as I've also said in interviews before, this separates the reading and the writing, or the writing and the editing of this work, sometimes *by years*. I'll often be editing words that I composed, or a couple of words, on thousands of little pieces of paper — years before. So I don't have any relationship with my prior state of mind, when I wrote these things, and I don't remember the epiphany that led to some vision or something, like poets often feel, and I can be much more mobile and flexible in editing.

I've talked about all these things before but now what I notice, in relation to the question the way Craig quoted it: there's something about operating at the micro-text level of the sign that is something you could produce at the moment, there's something that lends itself to sitting down and generating things at this micro level, and having all the possibilities more readily available to you. And I don't think that's true with discourse. If you're operating with discursive material I don't think discursive materials of the variety, of the complexity, of the vividness that you want to end up with, are all generateable in the moment. But, what I discovered was that they're *collectable*. So the difference to me ... the micro materials, these raw materials, are things that you could produce on the spot without any fear that you're being way too limited, you know, that you could imagine all the possibilities of the alphabet, and the combinations of the letters and sounds, and things and you could work through those ... with discourse you *can't* — *but* it lends itself to a kind of gradual accumulation in the same way that collecting does. And I'm also kind of an obsessive collector of books, of print material, of music records, and things like that, you know, Mexican and Puerto Rican graphs and masks, and a whole bunch of other things that you see around the house here. And that becomes my relationship to discursive materials — not that I'm expected to sit down at the typewriter and

come up with my personalized version of discursive materials, which is what then becomes a poem, but that I can work with editing a *vast* body of material that I accumulate and collect *over time* that I wouldn't have otherwise been able to do. Just as a thought, based on that helpful question and based on Craig's astute observation.

**DB:** I am fascinated by the fact that your compositional method enables you to improvise texts in real-time. You frequently perform this specific type of editing "live" in the context of collective multi-media performances, working alongside improvising musicians and dancers, highlighting and exploring the interrelationship between the textual and the performative, writing and sound, semiotics and aesthetics. Can you talk a bit about your experience as a performance artist? How that experience impacts your writing and what it feels like to actually share the performance space with an audience — the corporeality of it all?

**BA:** Okay. This relates a little bit to the previous question about methodology because when I started collaborating with people in the free improvisation music community, which is very elaborately developed here in NYC, and also with movement artists and dancers, in particular Sally Silvers, the choreographer, during this period of the early 1980s, I was not only starting to make music but to do collage live-mixing of tape materials that I would come up with to perform with other musicians, and with dancers. In other words, I became a musician and a sound designer partly by just transferring the existing aesthetic I had into sound. And so I felt that the way I had already begun to work with text materials in the late 70s — somewhat inspired by film maker friend Henry Hills, who was working with film stock in that same way, and also with people in the Chadbourne, Zorn, Cora, etc. free improv community who were working with sound in a somewhat similar way ... that I started to, again, wanting to play some role in these now multimedia performance possibilities, I started to make sound and make music, but, after *that* I realized that what I was doing with sound I can also do back again with text *in performance* by doing the editing that I normally do at home on stage — *live*. The way I wrote got translated into the way I could make music, and then the way I made music could translate back into the way I would be able to edit live in performance — just from the experiences I had as a musician then, performing with other musicians and dancers. In other words, I was able to see by noticing what kind of sound materials worked best to allow free improvisation between musicians and dancers, I could then see "Oh, okay. There's a possibility for text here which nobody else is doing, or, nobody else is really fully exploring

here!” And that’s what I started to do. Since I had already developed this way of editing in a highly modular form — where I’d sit on my sofa, and I’d have piles of cards, and I’d create phrases and little word clusters and then collage those together and make things that had some stability or shape to them, timewise — then I could do that same thing live and be influenced in my choices not only by what the words were, in a sense, telling me was possible but by making my editing choices bounce off of what the other musicians and dancers were doing. That’s basically what I started to do. I would sit and perform with dancers and musicians who had to be improvising.

In other words, this wasn’t something that you could do with composed music, and it wasn’t something that you could do with fully choreographed dance which already had a kind of fixed quality to it. And you couldn’t do it with already fixed texts — you couldn’t just go in and try to read a short story in the midst of a performance — although people *do* that, and it’s hideous, it’s deadly — or read their poems as accompaniment to a dance. No, all of that seemed disastrous to me. But this seemed possible: that you could weave your way through textual raw materials and make something in direct reverberating relationship to music and dance. All that, again, was made possible by the highly modular quality of the materials I was generating and also by the freely improvised nature of what these musicians and dancers were doing, again, pretty uniquely in New York. There were other places where free improv music and dance were happening but there really were *communities* of people here that were doing that. And that really lent itself terrifically to me getting a chance to try these things out.

**DB:** In an essay called “Praxis: A Political Economy of Noise and Informalism” you firmly suggest to synthesize an Adornian ‘informalism’ with a decidedly constructivist, Brechtian or Benjaminian, production aesthetic. Not in order to resolve tensions, but “to make progressively more appropriate the subjectively recharged material: by contextualizing it. To heal this polar opposition of material and subject in a praxis of sound: by a constructivist resocializing and ‘opening out’ of the material, and a constructivist contextualizing of the subject. Such informalist noise refuses any projective resolution of social contradiction. It performs this failure, eliciting a contrast with social openness. Indexed by internal contradictoriness, it offers a social model of surprise and the unforeseen, of unconstrained freedom and self-reflexivity and conceivable coherence. In sound — among other arenas — equipped with an unrepresive intersubjectivity, to bring the tensions to a head.”<sup>585</sup> What kind of artistic practice are you

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<sup>585</sup> This is the concluding paragraph from Andrews’s “Praxis: A Political Economy of Noise and Informalism,” published in Charles Bernstein’s collection of essays on sound in poetry, *Close Listening: Poetry and the*

thinking of? Could you give us some example? I mean, you gave us some already, but ...

**BA:** The things that I was interested in, in Adorno, at this point, was not what Adorno's most known for — it wasn't his *Aesthetic Theory*, it wasn't his *Negative Dialectics*, it wasn't his view about art praxis needing to be distanced and Olympian in its positioning — it was his work trying to confront avant-garde classical music in the 1950s, 1960s, which he talks about in his essay "Towards an Informal Music," and he had in mind people like Stockhausen, or Luigi Nono, in particular. Now, Nono was somebody that both Sally Silvers and I did a very large project on. We did a new version of Luigi Nono's opera about revolution, and that was one of the things that Adorno interested me in thinking about/in relationship to a poetic process. So he's talking about informalism as — there's also some links to some visual art that was happening at that point that I'm not as familiar with as I should be — so, I was trying to think about this as something that didn't put forward or project a prior forming, a prior form, so that you wouldn't as a listener — or, in my thinking, a reader — you wouldn't be presented with the finished form. You would be presented with something closer to these raw materials — that you would be presented with a kind of non grid-like landscape of possible links and connections, almost like things that we're more familiar with now in the digital domain, where you're online and you could see what, in a cornball kind of way, hypertext was involved with.

So there's something about that notion of links, of moving outward in a centrifugal direction, that forms, or potential forms, or virtual forms would be made possible but wouldn't be fixed ahead of time. That wouldn't be the thing you were supposed to be decoding, or getting a grip on, as a reader, but that you would be involved with in a constructivist exercise yourself. So, in this quote, which I haven't seen for a while, and I'm always curious to figure out what I might have meant ... if I use the phrase "to make progressively more appropriate" the material "by contextualizing it" — the word "appropriate" would be a way of talking about what the relationship of an item is to its context. Even in my work as a political scientist, my whole position was always to try to see how, let's say, a foreign policy seemed to be following the social rules emanating out of a particular context. If it followed those rules, rule-following then would be a way of talking about appropriate action in relationship to a context — so that you'd be trying to see how it got regularized, how it got normalized, how it got to ward off possibilities of dysfunction, how it got to ward off, or eliminate, the inappropriate.

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*Performed Word* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 73-85.

By “appropriate” I want to think about the modes of appropriateness of some material in relationship to various contexts. Then what I’m talking about in this second phrase here, “to heal this [...] opposition of material and subject,” this goes back to what I was saying a minute ago about the micro and macro levels. The micro level would be the raw material, the macro level would be the subject that ‘gets produced.’ And I’m interested — in both cases — in recontextualizing the material— what I called “constructivist resocializing of the material” — to see where else it could lead to beyond what it normally does. And the same, then, with the subject, you know, whether you’d see normally where the subject would get *policed*, and you could then see how a different reading of its context could open up new possibilities for putting the reader *in motion*, for putting the subject in motion, which is how I tend to think about this now.

Now, the thing I wasn’t sure about even in this phrase of mine when I talk about “perform[ing] this failure, eliciting a contrast with social openness” ... if I’m saying that “informalist noise refuses any projective resolution of social contradiction” — *that’s* the “failure.” You’re showing how this doesn’t ‘add up’ in some finished, formalist, closed-off, or centripetal text. And that will then elicit a contrast with what could otherwise be possible. So, that’s what I’m trying to get at as “social openness,” which *does* have to do with newer types of coherence that are conceivable that we haven’t gotten to yet.

**DB:** Which strikes, or so I think, a familiar chord with, or reminds me, at least a little bit, of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* and also his *Aesthetic Theory* in terms of ... well, that artworks —

**BA:** — *Negative Dialectics*, that’s a book of Adorno’s I haven’t even read. I’m not a scholar of any of these people, really, for whatever my enthusiasms might be.

**DB:** Alright, well, what I was reminded of was the idea that artworks must not resolve those tensions but, basically, testify to them ... to social antagonisms, bearing witness to suffering, etc. Now, you’re not interested so much, I think, in art “testifying” to anything, but rather opting for a constructivist approach. Therefore I was interested in how much of Adorno would be important for your artistic practice.

**BA:** Well, like I said ... Adorno in these late essays on music really does go beyond what he had been saying before about early Schoenberg, or Schoenberg and Berg, who he was a student of — Sally [Silvers] and I also did a giant recasting of Berg’s *Lulu*, you know, those are the two big opera-type pieces that we did as giant spectacles, with dozens and dozens of performers ... and Adorno talking about pre-twelve-tone, the atonal period of Schoenberg and early Berg —

**DB:** — before it gets *mechanized*.

**BA:** yes, before it gets mechanized — as close to what he later gets interested in, and still

skeptical, still a little nervous about, in people like Stockhausen and in Cage, even, and Nono, and Boulez, and three or four other people, in the 60s. It's that late rethinking of Adorno that I saw, when it comes to music, at least, and sound, and the sound dimension of literature, that I was most interested in, rather than the more mandarin moves of his *Aesthetic Theory*.

**DB:** Some of your performance texts have been published in a book called *Ex Why Zee: Performance texts, Collaborations, Word Maps, Bricolage & Improvisations* (1995). You obviously embrace free ensemble improvisation, real-time editing of raw material, radical parataxis and collage aesthetics, while being critical of artworks solely derived from chance operations — what you have called “procedural (even aleatory) fetishism”. What makes this distinction an important one?

**BA:** Okay, I've talked about this in other places<sup>586</sup> and maybe I don't need to say much more now, but just a couple of little things ... One: The notion of “free” improvisation I'd like to stress. The thing that made it different from other activities, for instance, in the music world, where the term gets defined by Derek Bailey in his book on improvisation, was that by “free” improvisation he means non-idiomatic, or non-genre-based, improvisation. Jazz musicians improvise, for instance, but when jazz musicians improvise it's still hearable as *jazz*, it seems to be located within that genre. The free improvisation movement, which pretty much begins in England in the early to mid-60s with people like Derek Bailey and Evan Parker, and some others — and also pretty much around the same time in Germany with the people that were doing FMP records, etc. — those people were influenced by free jazz but they were also influenced by contemporary classical music, and to *some* degree tried to put those two things together, so that you had a level of *extremity* in the playing, in the organization of the sound, that was maybe reminiscent of either avant-garde classical music or free jazz but didn't sound recognizable as either one. It then opened up any kind of possibilities for sound making without having it fit into any prior box.

And — going back to what I was saying about “Language Poetry” — that was a huge issue for me, that was what was attractive about free improvisation: the critique of genre. When it came to writing that was involved with ensemble-like playing with others then the question was, “what kind of writing works best in that situation?” Whether it was edited in real-time, or whether it was assembled out of prior editing of very disjunct, modular material.

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<sup>586</sup> Cf. both Kaufman and Thomas-Glass.

That's what seemed to work best in that situation. Radical parataxis, or collage-aesthetic-based work seemed to work best in a free improv situation, whereas if I'd been just playing, for instance, with folk musicians, or rock musicians, or classical musicians, or jazz musicians, then something *less* drastic in its parataxis, something less free from thematic centeredness, would have probably worked better. So that the more extreme versions of collage, and parataxis, and 'getting away from genre,' really fit the kind of collaborative context that I was very interested in, or invested in.

Now, the final thing, about the 'aleatory thing' ... again, that goes back to my, I think, always present but more recently *intensively thought through* emphasis on the reader. What I've said before was that, for some of us, looking at these chance-generated works in the 60s — Dick Higgins's work, or the things that Cage was doing himself, or some other people around the Cage circle in New York, like Jackson Mac Low, in particular, the major poet of that tendency — that we were just fascinated, blown away, by the results of those procedures but didn't really care that much about the procedure itself. There wasn't anything specific about that procedure that attracted us. In fact, it seemed to close itself off a little bit from the possibility of exploring the semantic trajectory, or horizon, of the material, which they weren't as interested in. And I think of procedural fetishism as a sub-category of fetishizing the production, of the writer, rather than doing anything directly relevant to the reader's experience. So it was always trying to shake things up in light of the reader's experience that led me onto the path that I'm on, and made me both attracted to the results, and unattracted to the emphasis on the procedure, in that work.

**DB:** Unlike many political artists and writers today, you have a radical aversion to identity politics. And a piece which very much exemplifies this is "Mistaken Identity", which you edited live in performance with Vernon Reid in the late 1990s. Like many of your texts, that piece is a *tour de force* through the obscene underside of American consumerism, liberal pluralism, and multinational capitalism and a sarcastic account of how ideology subjects us. What's the problem with identity in your opinion? And what's it all got to do with a critical poetics?

**BA:** Okay, another huge question. Identity politics as a political phenomenon I'm not gonna jump right in to. I was just reading Gadamer today ... he's quoting some early hermeneutic philosophers who talked about identifying, "to identify" was defined as "producing

sameness,” which, I think, is similar to the way Adorno talks about identification. Well, that’s pretty much the heart of my radical aversion to identity politics as it seems to be about “you’re committed to that, you’re committed to identity, you’re committed to identification, you’re committed to reproduction of some kind of sameness, even if it’s the sameness of a niche, the sameness of a faction, the sameness of an ethnic group, or a racial group, the sameness of a territorial group, etc.” That’s a closure which I am unhappy with. Identity operates as a filter, it operates to make less flexible the experience of some potential reader. So, there I’m more interested in the flexibility, or the hybridity, of a reader — their ability to operate with a broader toolkit, you know, with more irons in the fire, in a sense, their ability to shift around, their ability to be the opposite of the same, their ability to not have all their experience filtered through somebody else’s identity.

Actually I talked about this in my essay on Michael Lally’s work — about some of the dangers of a narcissism in the writing creating this identification structure in the reader, which is very much a Brechtian theme as well. And you mentioned the “sarcastic account of how ideology subjects us” ... again, there, ideology subjects us by creating identifiable subjects. And it’s not just ideology that does that, it’s also the whole material shape of everyday life and of the structures of Capital, and other things ... patriarchy, etc. etc. So it’s the subjection process that I’m interested in. And I’m interested in it because I think of it as needing an alternative, needing a chance, needing a prescription, and I think some of the sarcasm in that account is sarcasm about the claim that these things — multinational Capital, liberal pluralism, American consumerism — that they are enough! The claim that they are sufficient, that they are all you need. And I am asking: “Enough for who?” They may be enough for a very rigidly delimited type of identity, certain types of identity. They’re not enough for an open-ended notion of what a person or a subject could be. So that’s why I think of identity politics not as a solution but as part of the problem, in a sense. How the things that I’m unhappy with in the world sustain themselves very nicely.

**DB:** In an essay called “Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust”<sup>587</sup> Sianne Ngai engages your writing in *Shut Up* in terms of a poetics of disgust as opposed to a poetics of “desire production”. Theories, poetics, and hermeneutics of “desire” abound, as she notes, while disgust has no well-known paradigms associated with it and has largely remained outside any theoretical zone, even though in the social and material world of global capitalism potential

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<sup>587</sup> Sianne Ngai, “Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust,” *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, ed. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2002), 161-190.

objects of disgust abound. Is disgust the dialectical other of desire — a negativity that is harder to co-opt? What makes disgust an important force in contemporary experimental writing engaged with ideological concerns?

**BA:** Okay, just a couple of little things. If I hear you talk about desire, I feel as if a lot of the theorizing about desire, again, is focused around the author, or focused around something lacking in the reader, that by identifying with the author position they can somehow fill that *lack*. And, since I'm more trying to think about this in the reader's terms, that desire seems misplaced. In other words, to the extent I focus on the reader, I'm often focused on what's in the way of a more wide-ranging possibility for the reader. And what's in the way are things that are troubling, and even likely to occasion disgust. In your original formulation of this, that you sent me, you mentioned "corporate ideology, bigotry, geopolitical wars, forms of institutionalized inequality." Again, those things are objects of disgust, and it's not just *my* disgust. I mean, these are things that are generally lacking, or that need to be overcome, in some way. But it *is also my* disgust, you know: as an *author* I am entangled in this. For instance, when I'm giving public readings of *Shut Up*, which I've done a bunch of times over the years, of parts of that piece, *that* material is very difficult for *me* to handle, even as a reader. So I think it is a way of talking about things that are not *lacking* but that are *too much*, in a sense, that overwhelm you with excess. So that, in a way, highlighting disgust is a way of challenging pluralism, which is usually seen as the answer to what we don't have enough of. Whereas if the problem is that we have too much of certain things, then pluralism is not gonna be sufficient.

**DB:** In the 1970s it was probably you, and other Language Poets, and Amiri Baraka, who most harshly criticized the political *naïveté* of the New American Poetry, though in differing ways, and relentlessly politicized poetry in the US at a time of conservative backlash that would hibernate the Carter years, experience its peak in the Reagan-Bush era, and return forcefully with the Bush II Administration. Now, my impression is that while dissecting what both of you considered the political failure of the New Left in the face of multinational capitalism and geopolitical wars, dominant modes of poetics were brought under similar scrutiny. Would you agree?

**BA:** The issue with the New American Poetry that a number of us felt was most pressing was,

again, the ego-centered quality of it, from the author's valorized standpoint. So, the political *naïveté* as a sub-category of that — emphasis on the writer, on the ego of the writer — would be that the author can't really just be celebrating her own politics. In some ways, the political *naïveté* is related to this excessive valorizing of the central position of the writer. If that's what's generally been celebrated, then that automatically looks politically naïve because it looks too isolationist. It doesn't have this centrifugal push outward, toward others. The issue that we're operating at this time of conservative backlash ... I wanted to just caution people when they try to put someone's work in a time line ... is just to realize that, I mean, for a lot of us starting to do this kind of radical work in the 1970s that would come into print in the mid-70s, late 70s, or 80s ... that it doesn't necessarily represent an immediate response to what was going on right then. There's this backlog that occurs, where you're being shaped by prior impulses in the art world, in art communities, in art practice, that might have come out in response to an earlier phase. So that we're being influenced by radical work from the 60s that's inspiring us, and we're continuing to push that work forward during a time when the social and political landscape has changed drastically, where we're in the Nixon years or we're in the Carter years, and we're in a time of conservative backlash, or we're not. So I just wanted to complicate the time line by reminding us that all our work is, and myself included ... in some ways, disabled from being directly responsive to what's going on because we have some back catalogue, in a sense, we have some backlog, we have some *baggage* that has already shaped us. That we're not a blank slate, where we can just respond flexibly to whatever is happening.

And the other thing was ... what allows these radical heritages from the 60s, for instance, to continue on influencing work in the 70s, or in the 80s, when things shift way to the Right and become much more conservative, is the existence of a *community*. And that was one of the accomplishments, I think, of the so-called Language Writers. Not just that, in isolation, they produced a bunch of drastic and crazy texts but that they also created a community, a sense of community, institutions coming out of that community and sense of community, that allowed those earlier impulses and the practice based on them to survive in increasingly uncongenial circumstances.

There's also one thing you're asking — maybe you've asked Baraka this too — about "the political failure of the New Left" ... I mean, I just had to laugh. The idea that the New Left somehow had a sizeable enough constituency at any point in my lifetime to even be accused of political failure, I mean, that is like saying "you failed because your group of three

people didn't become a group of three million people" ... Well, I agree, that was a failure there. But, I think, from a European context, you have to realize how pathetically dinky the actual Left has always been in the United States — if it's not a specific opposition to the degradations of racists against the Civil Rights movement, or the degradations created by imperialist war in relation to the anti-war movement. If you get to the number of people that go beyond the civil rights or an anti-war position into a fully ideologized left-wing view of the world, that's just a virtual handful of folks, in a certain sense, in the US, unlike Europe.

**DB:** Reading your work *vis-à-vis* Amiri Baraka's, I was reminded of some of the conflicting ideas within the tradition of critical theory — esp. between so-called "Western" and so-called "Third World" Marxism, but also within the former, e.g. between Lukacs and Brecht, Brecht and Adorno, maybe Adorno and Baudrillard. I saw some of those conflicting theoretical positions being reflected in your respective aesthetico-political strategies, and I came to think of that as a contemporary recasting of a dialectical tension at the heart of avant-garde aesthetics: a tension between negation and affirmation, Adornian negativity and Brechtian/Benjaminian constructivist impulses. Although the coordinates of this conflict have certainly been altered by several theoretical paradigm shifts since the 1930s, it still hinges on the complex nexus between forms of aesthetic experience and political subjectivity. How do you approach this problem in your writing as well as in a performance context?

**BA:** As somebody that teaches International Political Economy, one thing that I'm struck by in the discussions about Third World Marxism is how significantly they focus on the role of the state as an authority, and as something that needs strengthening by radical forces. And something that then is involved with mobilizing forces. So it's something that either mobilizes the existing forces through strengthening the state, or that it somehow projects a certain type of citizen that it then wants to create. And there's something about that emphasis on the "strong state" — which is, of course, valorized in the whole Leninist tradition, Stalinist tradition, and may be something that Baraka talked about since his past theorizing certainly looked like he was much more sympathetic to that than most people are today, for instance, thinking about the "strong state" tradition. Something about the analogy with the author pops into my head. That there's something about the willingness to have an authoritarian state, and the willingness to have a very controlling, directive author, a little bit like some of those things I said about Brecht and the scientific control tradition, that might be relevant. And, I

think, anybody that wants to really valorize the position of the reader would end up taking a somewhat more libertarian, or —

**DB:** anarchist? —

**BA:** — democratic, anarchist ... Situationist position that would go against some of the things that I associate with the Leninist heritage, which, by the way, among the Language Writers (so-called) never had much play. I think Siliman might have been the closest to that, to flirting with that tradition, closer than the rest of us.

When you mention “Adornian negativity” ... now, there I’m wondering whether the negativity is about, or could be interpreted in the same light as, a kind of libertarian impulse: where you’re keeping your distance from established structures — maybe in a protective, defensive crouch, but at least there’s a distance — and that does then cut against any way of glamorizing authoritarian control — whether it’s coming from the consumer market place, the power of corporations, or whether it’s coming from a post-revolutionary state. In that way the “Brechtian/Benjaminian constructivist impulse” might still [...] and you can see this in Brecht, certainly, and you could see it at certain periods of Benjamin’s writing too, that little flirtation with authoritarian politics. For me it may have to do with: if I wanna have something be recognizable in the work, it may not be the recognition of any kind of pre-set template that could be provided by an authoritative author, “slash,” state, “slash,” revolutionary party, or elite — but the recognition of a possible future. There’s something about this negativity, this opening up of a space outside of the state’s sphere, which you don’t want to just become free market fetishism, but I also don’t want it to become a closed-off or prescribed future that’s given to me by the text, or by the author, or by the government. So somehow I do negotiate the intricacies of what we used to think of as anarcho-communism that become quite interesting here. Like how much emphasis you want on each side of that?

**DB:** Oh yes.

**BA:** Which, by the way, I remember having debates about with Jackson McLow — somebody with a long commitment, and radical commitment, to anarchism. But the problem, and I think at least people that theorize Third World Marxism were very clear that in the context of neoliberal globalization, that the only hope of survival of a different future for a progressive society in the Third World was to develop a fairly powerful state apparatus. That was the *only* way to *negotiate* with globalizing forces, and that meant that you couldn’t go all the way with this complete openness of anarchism, or, the complete openness of aleatory technique, but that you wanna have some guides, some reference point, some willingness to engage the semantic

dimension, just like you wanna have some willingness to engage with the state, engage with what the state can do.

**DB:** Post-Marxist political thinker Jacques Rancière contends that the politics of aesthetics operates in the unresolved tension between two opposed forms of politics, or rather, meta-politics: that of transforming art into forms of collective life, and that of preserving from all forms of militant or commercial compromise the autonomy that makes it a promise of emancipation.<sup>588</sup> For Rancière, this tension sheds some light on the paradoxes of critical art and its dialectical transformations. Let's assume Bürger's famous diagnosis of the neo-avant-garde's flawed strategy of repeating under late-capitalist conditions the meta-political project of the historical avant-garde ('the sublation of art into the praxis of life') is prompted by ignoring that constitutive tension — these two rather familiar polar opposites in avant-garde aesthetics: the (neo-)Dadas' and (neo-)Constructivists' 'art into life!' versus (qua Adorno) 'the necessity of art's relative autonomy to maintain its emancipatory promise.' Moreover, having rendered visible the effects of a false sublation of autonomy, one might say that the avant-garde, in any case, helped redefine the aesthetico-political project of the avant-garde: to make conceivable new forms of subjectivity through art without sublating the institution of art. Now, as a Marxist political scientist and avant-garde experimental poet, do you think that is possible without "touching" the material basis? Or: if we think about social reality in terms of its "discursive formation" — who has access to what type of discourse in the first place?

**BA:** When you talk about this distinction of transforming art into forms of collective life, on the one hand, and, on the other, that of preserving a kind of autonomy that offers a promise of emancipation ... well, okay ... transforming art into a form of life to me sounds too reminiscent of creating a closed-off text, so I would have a problem with that part of the binary. And the idea of trying to preserve autonomy from any kind of "militant or commercial compromise" ... that, I think, suggests too much emptying out of the literary work of any kind of content. In other words, that the autonomy for the reader which would need to be preserved for there to be a promise of emancipation — I could use the things that I've been thinking lately about the reader to make that sound pretty compatible with what I'm doing — but the idea that somehow there's this protected sphere that has to keep everything at a distance, in this Adorno-like way, that doesn't seem attractive. To me it's not autonomy that needs to be

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<sup>588</sup> Cf. esp. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2009), 36–46.

preserved, but it's the possibility of an expanding capacity. So that you can[’t] have that expanded capacity without confronting the reader or without inviting the reader into some new possibilities — and those new possibilities might involve things that Adorno, or someone else, would sniff or turn up their nose at and find to be all hideous compromise with mass culture, things like that. To me the issue is not whether some part of the mass culture looks disagreeable or not, or doesn't look like what you wanna be surrounded by — you'd rather sit around listening to Mozart string quartets or something — but no, it's whether it's useful and challenging your existing capacity and opening it up. And I always have felt that it does! So, therefore I don't see any need to be so protectionist. But I also don't feel the need just to fold everything into the existing everyday life the way Bürger was talking about what the neo-avant-garde's doing.

Now, the last thing you were saying is about “making conceivable new forms of subjectivity through art,” which I think is one of the projects that I’m fascinated by and interested in, “without sublating the institution of art.” Now, here, one spectrum that I would end up focusing on would be between aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. I don’t care so much about ‘dissolving’ the institution of art, but I do care about sublating, or dissolving, or transcending, or leaving in the dust, aesthetics. Because, I think, even what Kant and classical aestheticians, aesthetic philosophers, talked about as aesthetic does — in a less formalist way of understanding them, which is what I’m interested in — show the positive possibilities of aesthetic experience. That it isn’t just something we need to leave behind. It is something that opens up the possibility of capacitation for the reader, in certain ways.

The other thing you mention, whether this making conceivable of new forms of subjectivity is possible without “touching” the material base ... Well, here, if we think of the material base as processes, then I think it does involve touching the material base. If we think of the material base as thematics, or as economic or corporate structures, then you’re not really gonna be touching upon them, or opening them up, or eliminating them. So, that’s a distinction that I make about the material base — a little bit like the base/superstructure distinction I talked about earlier. And the final thing you asked about — “or: if we think about social realities in terms of their ‘discursive formation’ — who has access to what type of discourse in the first place?” Now, here’s something very challenging, very interesting — I don’t have a good response to it – Rancière, who I’ve been just now reading (I’m behind in my Rancière-ism), does highlight, and so did Bourdieu, in a different way. So, that question of access I haven’t really come to terms with yet. It may be I’m making too many assumptions

about what kind of discourse people need to have defamiliarized, you know. If I'm interested in defamiliarizing social discourse and not just defamiliarizing literary tradition, if I'm interested in what has been called a kind of *social modernism*, where the defamiliarizing effort points toward the social order and not just toward artistic heritages, then I still have to accept that some kinds of discourse about society will not even be accessible to certain people. And so then you might have to say, "Oh, you're defamiliarizing something that's over their heads anyway." That's a problem I haven't really come up with anything about yet.

**DB:** But you're also a professor, and a teacher. So that, for me, that goes hand in hand in terms of what kind of audience would be willing to deal with that. So, the question of education, obviously, is crucial, always.

**BA:** Right. And there we could, you know, if I knew more about the implications of Schiller, whom I'm also just now reading, we could probably talk about that too ... about aesthetic education. Maybe next year ... I'll be right on that one.

**DB:** Much of your work, I believe, critiques the hegemony of liberal pluralism as a form of repressive tolerance that shuts radical critique down and requires the exclusion of Marxisms from the political arena to maintain its liberal guise. How important do you think a systematic critique of liberal pluralism is today?

**BA:** Okay. A couple of things ... It isn't just Marxisms that are being excluded from the political arena in order for it to maintain its liberal guise; it's almost any kind of radical thought, whether it's coming from the Marxist tradition, the feminist tradition, from queer theory, from postcolonial theorizing, etc. etc. So, I think, the hegemony of liberal pluralism in the political realm *is* a kind of repressive tolerance that *does tend* to shut radical critique down. And it's quite parallel to view's that I've expressed about pluralism in the poetry community, in the poetry tradition, which is this: that a lot of people have come to appreciate various kinds of experimental writing, and so-called language writing, but have not been willing to give up their attachment to everything that preceded it. So it's as if we get added on to the smorgasbord or to the buffet at the end, as an extra, like "here's a little desert" or "here's something to have with your coffee," at the end, after you had your beefy meal of narrative fiction, author-centered lyric poetry, etc. My feeling — and I've been criticized for this before, for the 'progressivism' of it, for the 'Hegelianism' of it, you know, for the arrogance of it — that I've criticized what I consider more conservative kinds of writing

because I really think — and this is partly in terms of the canon, the formation of the canon, in terms of what people read or what's on required reading lists or what people think they need to know — that it's the appreciation for past monuments and past forms of excellence that are very often *in the way* of the kind of writing that I'm interested in having its full effect, which is that of shaking things up. And if it's gonna do that, one of the things that it might hopefully do is just to make people bored with some of the shit that went down in the past.

My model for this was often what happens in the avant music world. So that as a new type of sound, a new wrinkle in jazz history, for instance, which had been hugely formative for me in high school, in college, long before I became a poet, in thinking about artistic tradition — maybe the main art form that I was paying attention to — that one of the things that avant-garde jazz, in different eras, did — starting with bebop in the 40s, some of the progressive things that were happening in the 50s, and in free jazz in the 60s — was that it made people bored with previous eras' highly valued work, you know, and that it was the boredom and the impatience with those earlier styles that made a space for this new stuff to come and get its full measure of excitement and respect and admiration and popularity. That was one of the effects of it, and that's one of the effects that it had on me — all of a sudden a lot of the older stuff just seemed corny, sentimental ... just background music. It no longer had any kind of charge to it. And that boredom and that impatience wouldn't have happened without that radicalizing work. So, pluralism ... I'm finding to be an obstacle, you know, and therefore in need of a critique in the same way, I think, it works just the way you say in this question in the political realm. That it *does* exclude — it *requires* certain things to be excluded, or else just tagged on at the end as a little sop to, you know, "here's a few things for young people today," or "here's a few things for those of us who are not willing to just think about Marianne Moore, or Robert Lowell, you know, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, whoever it might be. I remember how Craig Dworkin told me that, when he was teaching at Princeton, one of his proudest moments was to get certain things taken off the required reading list. Robert Frost —

**DB:** [laughs]

**BA:** That was the point, that you can't just expect people to be interested in Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot and also to be excited about Clark Coolidge or someone like that. It requires a critique, in a certain sense, or, an unveiling of the hidden assumptions that went into those earlier works.

**DB:** Re-reading Benjamin's "The Artist as Producer," the other day, I was struck by the parallels between his explications of Tretiakov and Brecht as well as the notion of a "mediated solidarity" and *your* writing practice. I also found the following remark, which reminded me of how frequently I burst into a peculiar kind of laughter while reading your work: "We can remark in passing that there is no better starting point for thought than laughter. In particular, thought usually has a better chance when one is shaken by laughter than when one's mind is shaken and upset. The only extravagance of the epic theatre is its amount of laughter." Would you like to comment on the significance of humor for your writing as well as your performances?

**BA:** Sure. Let me first ask if you could say anything about this notion of "mediated solidarity" because that's been ages since I've read this essay and I don't remember what that means.

**DB:** Benjamin notes that solidarity with the proletariat, in terms of the bourgeois intellectual artist, or writer — who might well be sympathetic towards the proletariat and the idea of a socialist revolution — is still mostly lip service as long as he or she doesn't come up with new forms of art, or new methodologies of writing that seem capable of enacting that solidarity, in a mediated way. That it might be more appropriate for them to get involved in political rallying than using traditional bourgeois cultural formats to express their solidarity with workers and critique the bourgeoisie. That as bourgeois artists their solidarity can only ever be a mediated one, though very effective in just that sense, like in the work of Tretiakov and, of course, Brecht.

**BA:** This seems to echo the distinction between thematic and formal, right? Where the solidarity that might be expressed by, let's say, someone like myself — a middle-class person, college teacher, privilegedly white, privilegedly male, privilegedly heterosexual, you know — that I could, through the thematics of my work, gesture toward the ideas that were in solidarity with the working class, or with gays, or with women, or with people from other countries, or with people from other ethnic groups, etc. whereas a *mediated* solidarity, if that means coming up with a *method* that would resonate with the task that was in front of these oppressed groups, then, that's closer to my thinking about methodology as the emphasis. I suggested at one point, in an interview, that the "so-called Language Poets" might have been called the "Methodist poets" — which is not just an artifact of my early going to Sunday school in the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Cheverly, Maryland, which was then

taken over by the Methodists, or the fact that my father was an experimental psychology professor and scientist whose field was methodology, so, method is something I'm interested in. And I think it is the thing that can activate and capacitate the reader, more than merely invoking certain themes which are already identificatory, in the sense that I mentioned earlier, of producing sameness. That kind of solidarity I don't think gets you very far.

Now, the other thing, about laughter ... here, I think, laughter and humor involved in the reading of the work is something that I probably didn't think very much about until I came to New York and started giving public readings. That was a huge influence ... caused a big change in my thinking about my writing, and it literally was when I started to go to readings that I started to notice what people laughed at, not just in my own work because I was part of a poetry community and we were all going to each other's readings, and, you know, you could literally tell what was going to get a rise out of the audience, what would be provocative, what would make them go "Ooh, what was that?!", or, what would upset them or shock them or make them laugh, in particular. So I *did* start to think about that more intensively when I got away from silent readings, sitting at home — before I might have noticed that something was funny or not, but it wasn't quite as vivid, in my mind. Now, since then, one of my models lately for thinking about the effect of something like laughter would be thinking about the Sublime — once we reinterpret Kant's model.

DB: A materialist or social constructivist turn?

BA: Right, and there's actually a good book I'm just reading that lays this out, by a Dutchwoman, Kiene Wurth, a book called *Musically Sublime*<sup>589</sup>, and she questions the somewhat mechanical version of the response to the sublime in Kant, which takes on these two stages: one where you're confronted with something, you're confronted with a presentation which you can't get your hands around, in a sense, it's unrepresentable, it's too big to be grasped. But then there's a second stage where that gives you a hint of your actual capacity for dealing with that large scale size, or large scale forcefulness of some object in nature, or in an artwork.

So, when I've lately been thinking about the Sublime, that's the effect that I see happening in so-called Language Writing: where what's unrepresentable is the system of language, the systematic networked formation of language as a structure, and also as a process, and also as something that involves embodiment in texts and in readers or speakers or listeners. That if you produce completely drastic, radical texts that they will be able *at first*

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<sup>589</sup> Kiene B. Wurth, *Musically Sublime: Indeterminacy, Infinity, Irresolvability* (New York: Fordham UP, 2009).

to shake people up, and unsettle them, or, in the extreme, blow their mind ... as in “how to operate with a blown mind” — and *then* that will somehow work not just to immobilize them, not just to stun them, or put them into some kind of unconscious swoon, but it will somehow empower them, it will enable them, it will capacitate them, it would give them the confidence that they can, in fact, *see* that this initially unsettling and strange phenomenon actually points to a complicated bigger landscape or network than they had originally noticed. That they then realize they have the ability to get some leverage on it, get some grasp of it, and that that will be, in Kant’s term, *elevating*. That they will get this elevated, “enobling,” or what I’m calling, *capacitating* and transformative ability.

This book on the musically sublime was questioning the mechanical quality of the stages and suggesting that somehow the unsettling quality *never* stops, that you’re basically laminating those two things on top of one another, in the experience of these texts. And that is probably the closest to what’s really going on — that you stay fluid, you stay shaken up, you know, it’s like a martini, “shaken but not stirred”: things are in motion, they never reach a fixed, overly confident conclusion. But they do start to get you past your current fixations, your current fetishisms, your current attachments, your current identifications. So, in this quote, very interesting quote, when he says “thought usually has a better chance when one is shaken by laughter ...”, now, there I’m completely in agreement. So the “shaken by laughter” to me would be closer to this first stage where something is shaking you up. But then he says, “... than when one’s mind is *shaken and upset*.” I would almost flip it around — it’s your mind that’s being shaken and upset, and the laughter is the second stage, when you realize that you have some overview, you know, that actually you are not part of some kind of elite — like you get the joke and others don’t — but that you have *some* distance, you have some contextualizing capacity that you then become aware of.

And I think that’s what, you know, when I hear people laugh, let’s say, if I’m reading from something like *I Don’t Have Any Paper*, or more recent works, people laugh and it’s unsettling, but they’re laughing because the unsettling quality of it leads somewhere. It doesn’t just stop there but actually gives people the sense that “Oh, I can see that!” But it isn’t just the laughter *without* being unsettling. So laughter that comes without being unsettled to me is closer to identity politics, you know, that means you feel superior — “Oh, I can laugh at that. I’m not implicated in that, I’m keeping my distance, I’m adopting a protectionist stance, I’m gonna wall myself off” — which might actually have some relationship to Third World Marxism, and Leninist versions of opposing globalization, instead of being implicated by it.

So, to me, it's implicating them and *then* giving them some distance, instead of the distance coming without the implicatedness, which then to me is a little bit like arrogance. Your mind is not shaken up, you just laugh because you feel superior or you feel distanced and protectionist enough, like, "oh, this isn't really about me, this is about those other people that I'm gonna laugh at." So, no, I think there's this back and forth, this, shall we say, dialectic that can go on where you are in front of some kind of drastic, radical, shake-up style, you know, mind-shaking text, and then the humor comes from the pleasure, the pleasure of actually ... you know, if you can enjoy something that's unsettling it's because you can enjoy being reconfigured, and reconfiguring yourself, and that's the pleasure. Not just the sense of distance and superiority but the sense that you have a capacity of contextual interpreting and relocating, and reformatting that you were unaware of. And that's the capacity that's exhibited by the writing, so that you end up — and this is what people have always said about so-called Language Writing, where the reader's and the writer's positions are merged, or intertwined, or flip back and forth in some kind of oscillation, that that's what's going on — that the capacity that you achieve is the contextualizing capacity of the writing itself.

*New York City, September 27, 2010*

<questions skipped ...>

DB: You have maintained a consistently uncompromising position at the radical extreme of the literary avant-garde, continuing and extending forms and methods provided by Russian Futurism and Constructivism, Situationism, Fluxus, and most significantly the radical modernist experiments with language in the work of Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, and more recently, Clark Coolidge. But it appears to me that you also derived methods from avant-garde composers such as John Cage and John Zorn, as well as free improvising musicians such as Derek Bailey, and Noise musicians such as Merzbow. Or is that too far off? It appears to me that in your work specific types of avant-garde music come to serve as aesthetic paradigms. Would you agree that there is a politics of sound that informs the work on various levels, sometimes far from being apparent?

DB: Now, this question might be a bit abstract, but do you think that the artistic and critical legacies of SI, Fluxus, and the *Tel Quel* group provide ideas and methods that make the traditional dichotomy of Adornian versus Brechtian modernism seem dated?

DB: Following Adorno, Peter Bürger notes in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* that the sublation of art into the praxis of life can only be destructive of art's capacity to critique and imagine different shapes for reality if the praxis of daily life remains one of capitalist instrumentality. While acknowledging the unavoidable complicity of all art, avant-garde or otherwise, with late capitalist modes of production, reification, and commodification, I tend to reject Bürger's claim that in complicity with capitalism, art as an institution neutralizes the political content of the individual work and that the historical avant-garde's failure to sublate art into the praxis of life necessarily condemns the entire project of the postwar avant-gardes right from the start. As both a theorist and practitioner of avant-garde experimental writing and performance, I would love to hear your position on this subject? How does your own approach fit, or not fit, into this debate?

DB: Do you think that the avant-garde "tradition" still provides a lexicon of counter-hegemonic practices and techniques which can be strategically re-combined and extended to resist immediate neutralization and allow for an opening out of the work into the social?

DB: Now, this question might be a bit abstract, but do you think that the artistic and critical legacies of SI, Fluxus, and the *Tel Quel* group provide ideas and methods that make the traditional dichotomy of Adornian versus Brechtian modernism seem dated?

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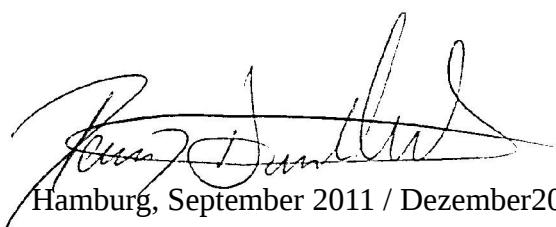
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Hiermit versichere ich an Eides Statt, dass ich die Arbeit selbständig angefertigt, andere als die von mir angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel nicht benutzt und die den herangezogenen Werken wörtlich oder inhaltlich entnommenen Stellen als solche kenntlich gemacht habe.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. J. Müller".

Hamburg, September 2011 / Dezember 2016