

Prendre position Taking a Stance

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Opinions

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EDITOR'S LETTER

Lessons of '68

TIM GRIFFIN

WHY MAY 1968? The risks attending any real attempt to consider anew the significance of the events that took place worldwide during that month—or even merely to honor their anniversary now, forty years later—would seem prohibitive. Certainly, to address that historical moment's ideas and actions in all their complexity and specificity would require far more than a single issue of an art magazine: Whole compendiums of studies from a wide variety of disciplinary vantages, sociological and economic, anthropological and artistic, would be needed. Yet therein rests, perhaps, an even greater obstacle: So much has already been said about May '68—indeed, so much *will* be said—pro and con, in both scholarly and popular discourse, that its fundamental realities and true legacies are, paradoxically enough, somewhat obscure to most. And so, in approaching these events today, one is inevitably in jeopardy of addressing not the events of 1968 so much as the stories already spun about them; and, given the dominant language of reductive narratives, one is also in jeopardy of idealizing (or belittling) the events' very image and form, of either succumbing to vapid nostalgia or dismissing the time as the stuff of myth.

Artforum's goals in reinvestigating the dynamics of May '68 are, therefore, purposefully reflexive, intending less to pin down, in any definitive way, the episodes of decades past than to discern their lingering, albeit altered, inscription within circumstances now. Nearly every text in the current issue looks at May 1968 specifically in historical counterpoint, operating in a comparative and genealogical mode that brings the questions of '68 to bear on today. To give an example that speaks to the contemporary art context: When independent scholar Sally Shafto writes of the Zanzibar group's intermingling of leftist politics and cinematic dandyism—and attributes a "destabilizing potential" to their contradictory mix—one is bound to think as well of similar film- and video-making collectives working now and to wonder whether the potential of such seeming contradiction in culture remains the same. Or, to speak in terms of society more generally: Architecture and urbanism theorist Tom McDonough looks again at Henri Lefebvre's account of May '68—in the sociologist's recently republished book *The Explosion*—in order to better grasp the metropolitan conditions that set the stage for the 2005 riots in the Parisian *banlieues*.

Yet the matters examined here are, perhaps, most pregnant in their implications when pertaining to society and the figuring of art within it. For throughout these pages, essayists repeatedly underline the ways in which the very creative models and

pedagogical endeavors presenting viable alternatives to social bureaucratization (Holert); from principles of individual autonomy steeped in aestheticism (Atkinson) to applied ideas of difference (Gillick)—are now threads in the vast fabric of commerce and industry. Regardless of whether these observations provide a measure of the success of May's *enragés* or of their appeasement, they underline art's increased role within the economies of culture more generally—such that our definition of what art *is* should likely be revisited. The potential significance is clear enough. As political philosopher Antonio Negri says in conversation with Sylvère Lotringer, speaking about the aftermath of '68: "It was clear that the relation between work and daily activity had become more intimate." It is with such refrains in mind that the current issue suggests itself to be a sequel, or coda, to *Artforum's* consideration last month of "Art and Its Markets," and that lessons for today become apparent even as one reads the stories of May '68 in the spirit of their own time. □

Jean-Luc Godard, *La Chinoise*, 1967, still from a color film in 35 mm, 96 minutes. Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud). © 2008 Koch Lorber Films. Image scan courtesy of the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Special thanks to Hedi El Kholi.



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Kunstgrift: Art as

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Event, Not Com- modity

Cindy Sherman

Camera Messenger, collection
Celebrating Monogram.

Photo : © Louis Vuitton Malletier

So here we are again, perhaps a bit more exhausted this time, facing the reduction of art to a mere luxury good precisely at a moment when we most need its uncanny abilities to construct and to express decentred collective experiences. And right now we cannot expect artists to solve this problem.

They have become an industry: whether they are pseudo-radicals borrowing from vague political gestures made decades ago as they hawk Hermès scarves (Daniel Buren) or Louis Vuitton bags (Cindy Sherman), or young millionaires—thousands of them—prowling the bloodless spaces of MFA exhibitions and, later, the wings of auction houses.¹ No. What we need now, at least for the time being, is for the rest of us—the audience for art, the masses of (non)artists and (non)consumers—to own up to our silence and our clichéd rationales for why art matters.

What do we (the 99 percent) need art to become? What capacities and affects is art still capable of producing? What forces, aside from capital, can motivate and compel our relationship with artworks?

This is a moment for critical anamnesis. We must recollect why we need art ontologically, ethically, and politically. How are we to counter this return to *objets d'art* from works of art? Why are we encouraged and allowed to forget that art *works*, that it undertakes the aesthetic and epistemic labour of defacing and queering anything posited as “natural” or “given” or “that’s just how it is”? This is the essential aspect of art’s vitality: creating shared, open, immanent worlds.

Let us be clear about the matter at hand, which we feel that even the signed statement initiated by the French online opinion journal *Mediapart* misses entirely. Early in 2015, *Mediapart* issued a petition bearing the title “L’art n’est-il qu’un produit de luxe?” (Is art just a luxury product?). The petition was signed by many people, including Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Georges Didi-Huberman. But the argument presented and supported by these signatures evades the heart of the matter. *The heart of the matter is the danger that art continues to pose to hegemonic power.* Art is dangerous and terror-inducing precisely because it calls attention to the shabby constructedness of what is promoted as real, natural, true, or inevitable. Even Plato’s respectful fear of art—the “divine terror” that he chose to acknowledge but banned from his ideal republic—is motivated not because art transcends or flees the world, but because it immerses you in its very fabric, in the funk, viscera, and sinew of another world’s becoming.² The paradox remains that far too

many people believe, or are led to believe, that art is impotent. But the very desire of the moneyed classes and institutions to co-opt and neutralize it in advance belies that assumption of impotence.

The intensive financialization of culture that we are witnessing now is certainly a severe form of patronage, replete with its attendant patronizing attitude. It is severe because it consolidates power by reducing everything to the single fiction that it is the 1 percent who deign to keep the “arts” alive, or not. So, as the circle closes, let us—the multitude—remember why art is the target. It is not its impotence, but its potency, its very power as *Kunstgriff*: the unexpected turn, trick, or reversal that art creates when imagination becomes action, when what is given or “natural” becomes another actuality, right before our eyes.

We borrow the concept of *Kunstgriff*, the “turn” or “reversal” that art enacts, from Walter Benjamin. We see it as an aesthetic concept linked to Benjamin’s famous historiographic concept of “the turn of recollection” (*die Wendung des Eingedenkens*), which is an inversion, an immanent about-face.³ It is defined as a point at which there is an unexpected—yet, in retrospect, not unmotivated—turn of events, a reorientation that one can now see is neither wholly consistent nor inevitable. It is this power or force that

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1 — In 2010 Daniel Buren created 365 silk scarves for Hermès, collectively titled *Photo-souvenirs au carré*, that drew on his well-known black-and-white vertical stripes (his “sign” of painting) that played such a crucial role in his radical institutional critique works of the 1960s and 1970s. Cindy Sherman was selected as one of Louis Vuitton’s “Iconoclasts” and chose to redesign a travelling trunk as part of the Celebrating Monogram project in 2014. Sherman said of her trunk, “I imagine that a Saudi Arabian princess might use it.”

2 — See Donald Preziosi, *Art, Religion, Amnesia: The Enchantments of Credulity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014).

3 — See Jae Emerling, “An Art History of Means: Arendt-Benjamin,” *Journal of Art Historiography*, vol. 1 (December 2009), http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/media_139138_en.pdf.



we must recollect and fight for in real terms. For us, an example of such real terms would be how and why art and beauty remain inextricable. The beautiful is the act of touching an outside, beyond all value, beyond good and evil. It is the decisive movement wherein what was, fortuitously becomes what will have been.

Art is our commonwealth, our most-honed weapon, our Spinozist joy. As such, art is a measure of our affective capacity, our capacity to affect and be affected by bodies (forms) and forces outside of ourselves. Art produces affects, not values. Its most vital affect is joy—a Spinozist joy that “cannot be excessive, but is always good” because “it is a pleasure which, in so far as it is related to the body, consists in the fact that all parts of the body are equally effected.”⁴ Spinoza reminds us that “the body’s power of acting is increased or helped” by what it encounters in the world. To touch an outside, to sense the immanence of being, temporality, and life as such: this is the joy that art offers. Why lay this power down? Why cede our ontological, affective, durational power to the nouveau riche and the curators of high-end cool that consume only logos, brand names, and capital?

Isn’t something similar going on in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s latest work *Commonwealth*? (Such an apt title for this series of discussions.) Toward the end, they discuss art and revitalize art historian Alois Riegl’s complex notion of *Kunstwollen*, reminding us that it has nothing to do with the financialization of culture but with only the productive desire of art

to survive clandestinely even intense periods of crass deluxe ostentation.⁵ It survives in order to preserve its capacity to affect and our capacity to be affected by something wholly outside of ourselves yet wholly within life.

All of these untimely repetitions—even the current resurrection of the aristocratic patron in new/no clothes—are openings for critique created by *art-work*, what Gilles Deleuze calls “crowned anarchy.”⁶ This is art as event. As such, it is pure immanence, abiding no transcendent law, economy, or authority. Nor does it make “any distinction at all between things that might be called natural and things that might be called artificial” because “artifice is fully part of Nature, since each thing... is defined by the arrangements of motions and affects into which it enters, whether these arrangements are artificial or natural.”⁷ An event is owned by no one. It is no one. It only moves immanently. It only runs between things and people, complicating them. It is the actualization of a life, a becoming-other (even becoming-indiscernible, shared and open) that is at once sensible and intelligible, aesthetic and epistemic.

So let us not concern ourselves with luxury goods, which are only the sallow death masks of art. Let us concern ourselves with events, which often take place when it seems as if nothing is happening or could be happening at all. Let us remember and muster the strength to create a new mode of relationship with this beautiful movement—the *very event of art*—no matter how exhausted we have become. ●

4 — Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. G. H. R. Parkinson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 257–58. Gilles Deleuze explains and amplifies the importance of joy in Spinoza and in all of our encounters, especially those with images and artworks; see especially his *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 48–50.

5 — Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 375.

6 — On “crowned anarchy,” see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 37, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 158 and the entirety of the remarkable tenth chapter.

7 — Deleuze, *Spinoza*, 124. On art and immanence, see Jae Emerling, “An Art Historical Return to Bergson,” in *Bergson and the Art of Immanence: Painting, Photography, Film*, ed. John Mullarkey and Charlotte de Mille (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 260–71.



Daniel Buren

← *Photos-souvenirs au carré*,
La Monnaie de Paris, Paris, 2010.

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Cindy Sherman

† *Studio in a Trunk*, collection
Celebrating Monogram.

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