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Art as a Second-Degree Medium: On Sites, Nonsites and Appropriations

In the early 21st century, Marcel Broodthaers's words from 1974 ring as true as ever: »In fact I don't believe that it is legitimate to define Art in any other way except through one constant factor, its transformation into a commodity. In our time this process accelerates to the point where we have a superposition of artistic and commercial value. Art could be said to constitute a singular representation of the phenomenon of reification, a kind of tautology.«¹ The bourgeois public sphere that came into being in the late eighteenth century – presented in a somewhat too nostalgic light by Habermas – was founded on public debate, particularly in print.² The role of art in this realm was ambiguous: Art was an important topic for many late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century publications, and critical debate concerning art often had political connotations. But art was also increasingly seen as a phenomenon that transcended analysis and debate, that provided the weary bourgeois with a refuge in the form of pure aesthetic contemplation – even though the actual debates raging around art often belied this ideology. The current consumerist ideology is stronger and thrives on the suggestion of ›controversy‹. Art is now seen as a sphere of exciting, trendy, highbrow commodities, and as such it is integrated into the publicness of spectacle – which has its roots in the ›classical‹ public sphere but truly blossoms today. But if art cannot exist outside spectacle, in a sphere of autonomous purity, does its in some ways exceptional status within spectacle – as a ›different‹, ›difficult‹ product – not also offer possibilities?

Sites and Nonsites

Attempts to escape from an art world that functioned as a specialised, elitist segment of spectacle have frequently been naïve. Especially from the 1960s onwards, some artists tried to create a truly ›public art‹ outside the confines of the commodity-based

and elitist art world. Allan Kaprow staged his first happenings in art galleries, but during the sixties he increasingly bypassed these locations in favour of the streets, a field in the country or a beach. However, if he and others wanted to retain a degree of visibility, they still had to fall back on art media like exhibitions and magazines. Perhaps they preferred ›alternative‹ media such as small magazines or artist's books to posh galleries, but in the end the exhibition space was able to absorb even the most extreme manifestations of art in some way or another (through relic-objects, photographic documentation or film). In 1969, Robert Smithson put it very succinctly: »It seems that no matter how far out you go, you are always thrown back on your point of origin.«³ If you want to remain an artist, that is; some artists, like Lee Lozano, dropped out.

In a more programmatic way, after lengthy internal struggles, the *Situationist International* also abandoned art. The early *S. I.*, before 1962, had an important artistic faction, of whose most important protagonist was Asger Jorn. After the artists had left or had been expelled, the *S. I.* under the leadership of Guy Debord continued as an (apparently) more purely political-revolutionary movement – although its aim to bring about a post-spectacular society in which the construction of ›situations‹ would be the cornerstone of a new form of life is still to an extent an ›aesthetic‹ programme. In order to break with spectacle and create a fulfilling lived experience no longer reduced to an impoverished shadow of the commodity, art had to be left behind. After all, for the *S. I.* art had become nothing more than the ultimate commodity, a high-brow part of spectacle.⁴ Around 1970, neo-avant-garde artists like Smithson, Broodthaers and Hans Haacke opted for another alternative. These now heavily canonised and institutionalised artists to a certain extent subscribed to the Situationists' analysis, but rather than abandoning art, they tried to effect a thorough critique of the art world through their work, and investigate and criticise art's commodification in the spectacular economy. Like the *S. I.*, they rejected half-hearted romantic attempts at ›infiltrating life‹ that still remained with one foot in the art world, but they were not prepared to abandon art completely to speculation and hype.

In the 1990s Andrea Fraser made a distinction between ›art‹ and what she termed »cultural production.« According to her definition, a cultural practice is ›art‹ only if it engages critically with its context, if it is self-reflective. If it does not, it is »cultural production« that merely feeds the machine of spectacle, like Hollywood films.⁵ Fraser's work continues or revives aspects of work by neo-avant-garde artists like Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers, and her distinction is an explicit version of one that underlies their work. Since there was no art outside of an art world that had become a posh franchise of spectacle, the task of critical or radical artists became the analysis and critique of this context. The contextual work of the neo-avant-garde led to an almost fetishist degree of concentration on the art world, but in the same time

it also stimulated an investigation of the interconnections – both already existing and possible interconnections – between the art world and other realms of society. In various *in situ* works, Daniel Buren set up a dialectic between non-art sites and art media like exhibitions and magazines, for instance by hanging one piece of cloth with his characteristic stripes in a museum or gallery and one across the street outside.⁶ A work may exist in ›public space‹, but it only becomes public as a work of art – rather than a gratuitous physical object – through its inclusion in the media of the art world. Smithson developed a dialectic similar to that of Buren in the relation between *site* and *nonsite*. The nonsite is a manifestation of a site (such as a quarry) in the gallery space, in the ›white cube‹; Smithson's nonsite works usually consisted of stones in geometrical containers, forming a »three-dimensional abstract map.«⁷ The white cube can also in fact be regarded as a nonsite or as the mother of all nonsites: what is exhibited here is automatically a nonsite, hence a representation in an unreal space that turns everything into art.

If the exhibition space functions as a medium that abstracts and negates the outside space, this nonsite can only exist because of a social and institutional frame – the art world. In fact, when artists such as Buren or Michel Asher investigated the spaces of galleries and museums, they regarded them as sites, although as *social*, *discursive* and *institutional* sites rather than as purely spatial ones. In this respect, these artist presaged developments in site-specific art in the strict sense, the work of artists who realised works on ›real‹ sites outside the nonsite-site of the gallery space: As Miwon Kwon has argued, in the 1980s and 1990s ›sites‹ came to be defined increasingly in social and discursive terms.⁸ This led to a new kind of ›social art‹, in which artists collaborate with groups or ›communities‹ in the context of a ›public art‹ project. Such projects sometimes suffered from a belief that the artist could simply represent a group without influencing and to some degree constituting the community through his or her representation.⁹ However, if representation is seen as active and productive rather than as passive, such collaborative artworks could lead to representations that challenge spectacular clichés – on a small scale. But although some projects may involve giving groups of people means for their own image production – by establishing a video workshop, for example – the resulting representations are usually presented in art media such as catalogues, exhibitions and magazines. Insofar as they contest the representations of the mass media by presenting these works, they could be said to function as counter-media, constituting counter-publics.¹⁰ This counter-public consists primarily of the art world audience, not the group with which the artist worked, such as inner-city kids.

The notion of a counter-public usually refers to more grass-roots-type groups, based on gender, sexual orientation or race, that use alternative media to question and undermine the ways in which they are represented (or not) by mass media. The

problem with such counter-publics and counter-media can be that they turn identity into a fetish and retreat into a consumerist celebration of difference, which in the end turns them into special interest media that pose no challenge to the dubious publicness of the mass media. If the concept of counter-media and a counter-publicness has any meaning, it should emphasise the tactical and dialectical relationship with the mass media. Under certain circumstances, art media can function as counter-media – if with certain unique distinguishing characteristics, such as a certain degree of symbolic capital and real capital often absent in other counter-media. This can certainly turn counter-publicness into a sham, for instance by the production of quasi-radical simulations of discourse, or by using social ›sites‹ in order to represent them in an artistic context that feasts on their ›otherness‹; however, there is a potential for more interesting, transformative encounters between art-world nonsite and other social sites. What is especially important is that artists keep the site-nonsite-dialectic in mind and deal with it in intelligent – and ethical – ways.

Media Sites

Sometimes Robert Smithson combined his method of ›mapping‹ sites in a three-dimensional form with the use of photography. He also practised the genre of the photo-essay, with memorable examples such as *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967) and *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* (1969). Even so, Smithson was somewhat ambivalent about photography, which had the effect of reducing the site: »Photographs are the most extreme contraction, because they reduce everything to a rectangle and shrink everything down.«¹¹ Film, a more expansive medium, could perhaps provide an alternative. Smithson's earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is firmly located on a ›site‹, namely the Great Salt Lake in Utah, but this did not change the site–nonsite dialectic: It was obvious that relatively few people would actually get to see the work *in situ* and many more via reproductions. In addition to the countless photos of *Spiral Jetty* published in art magazines, Smithson also made a film that has been shown in many art institutions and which represents the work in retrospectives of Smithson's oeuvre. *Spiral Jetty* is in fact a twofold work. On the one hand there is the spiralling pier in the salt lake, recorded in any number of photographs, and on the other hand the film of the same title, which is anything but a simple documentary: with allusions to Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* and alternating images of dinosaurs and the excavators building the Jetty, Smithson created a mythical fiction, a cinematographic site/nonsite.

The years of Smithson's mature work – the late 1960s and early 1970s – were also the years when it became clear that photography, film and video had become a per-

manent fixture in the realm of visual art. Initially, these media were seen as a means of recording ephemeral or remote works (performances, land art pieces).¹² When describing how he took photographs in Passaic, New Jersey, in his magazine piece *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, Robert Smithson wrote about having the feeling of »photographing a photograph«, an already existing, over-exposed picture.¹³ Through his longstanding dialogue with the notion of the picturesque, Smithson was well aware that our perception of the world is mediated by representations and that one cannot escape (only manipulate and deconstruct) visual conventions. In the society of the spectacle, these representations are more often those of the mass media than those of art – although the mass media often perpetuate dated conventions derived from classical western art. Smithson knew that sites – however remote – were not pure but infiltrated by spectacle; they were effectively already nonsites, already representations.

Marcel Broodthaers was also keenly aware of this, even when he was still a poet and journalist, before making the transition to visual art. When Broodthaers wrote a text, inspired by a photograph he made in 1960 of birds flying past Zadkine's monument in Rotterdam, he contrasted his picture with Hitchcock's *The Birds* (from 1962, so the text must be of a later date than the picture). The birds in his photograph do not, he maintains, »evoke a suspense movie«, but rather the stukas that bombarded Rotterdam in 1940, an act which is commemorated by Zadkine's statue. »The birds belong to the reality of our world. Hitchcock is abusing us. Images are used as medical substances to prolong our sleep.«¹⁴ Thus, the site-nonsite dialectic can also be said to refer to the ›outside world‹ as being always already mediated, a world of representations, of spectacle. One can react to this by making ›social works of art‹ that result in divergent and (self)critical representations. Another way in which art can function as a counter-medium is by operating as a second-degree medium that imports actual media images (or texts) into the art context in order to investigate and manipulate them. It is true that the art world has been increasingly integrated into the entertainment industry, with museums programming blockbusters and creating ›experiences‹; as the Situationists observed, art has become part of spectacle. But artistic media are as it were the uncanny doppelganger of mass media; art is part of spectacle that places a premium of self-reflection. As often as this characteristic degenerates into a charade, it can also be put to use.

Myths and Mythology

The culmination of Marcel Broodthaers' fictitious *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, the tool with which he investigated the art world, was the legendary



Fig. 1: Marcel Broodthaers Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, installation ›Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute‹ (the museum's Section des figures) in Düsseldorf (1972)
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installation *Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute* (the museum's *Section des figures*) in Düsseldorf (1972, see picture 1). The installation consisted of a depiction of eagles in all sizes and media, ranging from cheap printed matter and advertisements to paintings and valuable antiquities on loan from real museums. Broodthaers was fascinated by the eagle as a mythical creature, one associated with strength, divinity and empire. Even the show's title clearly signals that the eagle is examined as a myth by claiming to present eagles from a prehistoric epoch to the present – while not factually incorrect, such a claim tends to naturalise contemporary society by placing it at the apex of the history of civilisation. Broodthaers saw it as his task to »tear some feathers from the mythical eagle«, which comes with the suggestion of »Divine spirit. Spirit of conquest. Imperialism.« Broodthaers noted sardonically that the force and power ascribed to this animal are true only of the eagle as a mythical sign, while, according to biologists, the actual creature is stupid and cowardly, scared even of a bicycle.¹⁵

By showing paintings (including one by Gerhard Richter), as well as imperial-looking sculpture and jewellery in combination with artefacts of mass culture, Broodthaers takes into account the ways in which the conventions of media inflect images and increase or decrease their powers. In the *Section publicité* of the museum, which

was shown at the 1972 *Documenta*, a lot of the material was again present in photographs and slide projections, and the emphasis was now on the eagle in product design and advertising. Broodthaers states that the mythic power of the eagle, which one might have presumed to have waned in the modern age, comes to fore again in the media, in advertising: »The language of publicity aims at the subconscious of the viewer-consumer, and thus the magical eagle regains its full power.«¹⁶ By combining eagles from different eras and in different media, Broodthaers intended to »sabotage the use value of the eagle as a symbol, and reduce it to its zero degree in order to introduce a critical dimension into the history and use of this symbol.«¹⁷

There is a Barthesian ring to this remark about a »visual zero degree« that would make the signs opaque, emphasise their status as signs and thus sabotage their functioning. But this »zero degree« is dependent on his art's status as a second-degree (or even third-degree) system, which incorporated images and other material from various sources. It could be said that in this respect Broodthaers paralleled Barthes' project in *Mythologies*, which was well-known to Broodthaers, although Broodthaers' mythology is one that employs irony and the grotesque accumulation of materials rather than a Barthesian analysis of specific images or texts.¹⁸ For Barthes, »myth« is a second-degree semiotic system that »robs« a text's or an image's first degree meaning. The image of a black soldier saluting before the French flag has a second, »mythical« meaning, to the effect that the French nation is universal and that people of different races pledge allegiance to it. At one point Barthes famously asks: »Since myth robs language, why not rob myth?«¹⁹ According to Barthes such a robbed, second-degree myth (which is a third-degree semiological system, since it uses myths as source material that are already second-degree semiological systems grafted onto images and texts) would constitute an »artificial myth« or a »true mythology.«²⁰ Is this not precisely what Broodthaers does, using the art context as his second-degree medium, one that reflects on media images and texts?

For Appropriation art of the years around 1980, Barthes was also an important point of reference. Appropriation artists like Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince used »rephotography;« literalising Smithson's remark about »photographing a photograph«, they made photographs of photographs, thus emphasising art's status as a second-degree system. »Drawn to pictures whose status is that of a cultural myth, Levine discloses that status and its psychological resonances through the imposition of very simple strategies. (...) Levine steals them away from their usual place in our cultures and subverts their mythologies.«²¹ The aim of such a mythology is to engage in something other than mere »cultural production«, to use Fraser's terminology. But it has to be acknowledged that such a position is open to corruption and ideological abuse. Although parts of the art world are rather hostile to discourse, art theory and criticism are an integral part of this system; is the art world not precisely

the part of spectacle where ›criticality‹ and ›complexity‹ can increase market value? Critical and self-reflexive practices (such as those of Broodthaers or Andrea Fraser) in the end help to perpetuate the system, and when one sees the »superposition of artistic and commercial values« in art, the reign of vested interest and speculation, the Situationist conclusion that this system is beyond redemption becomes rather compelling.

Are the more effective exercises in mythology not found in less arty surroundings, for instance on certain web sites? Are popular *détournements* that circulate on the internet not more effective than highbrow pieces by critical artists? Are not music groups that practice forms of cultural resistance (from *Public Enemy* to *Negativland*) less likely to be ideologically neutralised by being branded ›important art? Perhaps, but artists like Broodthaers, Levine or Fraser have never claimed that they were about to topple the regime of spectacle. What they can do is to participate in the maintenance of a critical sphere which is no doubt constantly being undermined by commodification, but which nonetheless offers space for practices and a discourse that would be difficult to maintain elsewhere. Ideally, various links would be forged between more reflexive and more activist forms of mythology, inside and outside the art world. At the very least there should be a realisation among artists that they have, or should have, more in common with various people operating on the fringes of pop culture or in various subcultures than with Julian Schnabel or Charles Saatchi.

Notes

- 1 Marcel Broodthaers, *Être bien pensant ou ne pas être. Être aveugle* (1975), in: Anna Hakkens, ed., *Marcel Broodthaers par lui-même*, Ghent 1998, 122-123, here 122.
- 2 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main 1990 (1962).
- 3 Robert Smithson, *Fragments of an Interview with P.A. (Patsy) Norvell* (1969), in: Robert Smithson. *The Collected Writings*. Ed. by Jack Flam, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 1996, 192-193.
- 4 An interesting example of the Situationist analysis of art in the society of the spectacle was written by Raoul Vaneigem under a pseudonym Jules-François Dupuis, *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*, Edinburgh, London and San Francisco, 1999.
- 5 Andrea Fraser, »Es ist Kunst, wenn ich sage, dass es das ist, oder...«, in: *Texte zur Kunst* 20 (1995), 35-40.
- 6 I refer to the notorious Guggenheim piece, *Centrifuge / Centripète* (1971). Because the huge striped banner inside the museum was considered to be too dominant by other artists who participated in the same show, it was removed. Another crucial work by Buren in this respect is *Fond-Forme* (Geneva 1976), in which striped message boards at the university and the art school were paralleled by striped panels of the same dimensions and colours at the *Centre d'Art Contemporain* – where of course they formed an artistic installation to be contemplated rather than surfaces to be used for pinning notes on.
- 7 Robert Cummings, Interview with Robert Smithson for the *Archives of American Art / Smithsonian Institution* (1972), in: Smithson, *Writings*, as note 3, 193.
- 8 Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge (MA) and London 2002, 1-55.

- 9 Ibid., 138-155.
- 10 See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York 2002, 65-124.
- 11 Smithson, *Fragments*, as note 3, 193.
- 12 See Jeff Wall, »Marks of Indifference.« *Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art*, in: Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, eds., *Reconsidering the Object of Art. 1965-1975* (exhibition catalogue), Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 1995, 247-267. Wall's analysis of the return of the ›picture‹ through photography is brilliant, if reductionist and self-serving in its tendency to treat conceptual photography as a stepping-stone for the later, less ›deskkilled‹ photography of Wall and others.
- 13 Robert Smithson, *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, New Jersey (1967), in: idem, *Writings*, as note 3, 68-74, here 70.
- 14 Marcel Broodthaers, untitled poem (1962 or later), in: Marcel Broodthaers, *Texte et Photos*. Ed. by Maria Gilissen and Susanne Lange, Bruxelles and Cologne 2003, 125, my translation.
- 15 Marcel Broodthaers, *Section des figures* (1972), in: Hakkens, Broodthaers, as note 1, 90.
- 16 Ibid., 91, my translation.
- 17 Marcel Broodthaers, *Le degré zéro* (1973), in: Hakkens, Broodthaers, as note 1, 95, my translation.
- 18 Broodthaers endorsed Michael Oppitz's text *Adler Pfeife Urinoir*, in which his work is analysed with tools provided by Barthes' *Mythologies*. An extract, though stripped of the more ›technical‹ Barthesian parts, was published in the catalogue / artist's book *Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute*. Vol. 2, Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf 1972, 20-21. The complete text (signed Mark Oppitz) was published in *Interfunktionen* 9 (1972), 177-180. In a mail to the author, Michael Oppitz remembers discussing Barthes with Broodthaers: »Wir haben uns des öfteren über einzelne Kapitel und Detailbeobachtungen unterhalten, so über die Aktentasche von Abbé Pierre, die Déesse (D. S.) oder das Beefsteak tatar und die Symbolik von Arbeiterkost. Wir haben viel anerkennend darüber gelacht. (...) In erster Linie reizte Broodthaers das Barthes'sche Verständnis von Semiologie, das er für seine eigenen Sachen sich anverwandelte.«
- 19 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris 1970 ('1957), 209, my translation. Hal Foster quotes this sentence when discussing Appropriation art in Hal Foster, *Recordings. Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle and Washington 1985, 169.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Douglas Crimp, *Pictures* (1979), in: Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York and Boston 1984, 175-187, here 185.