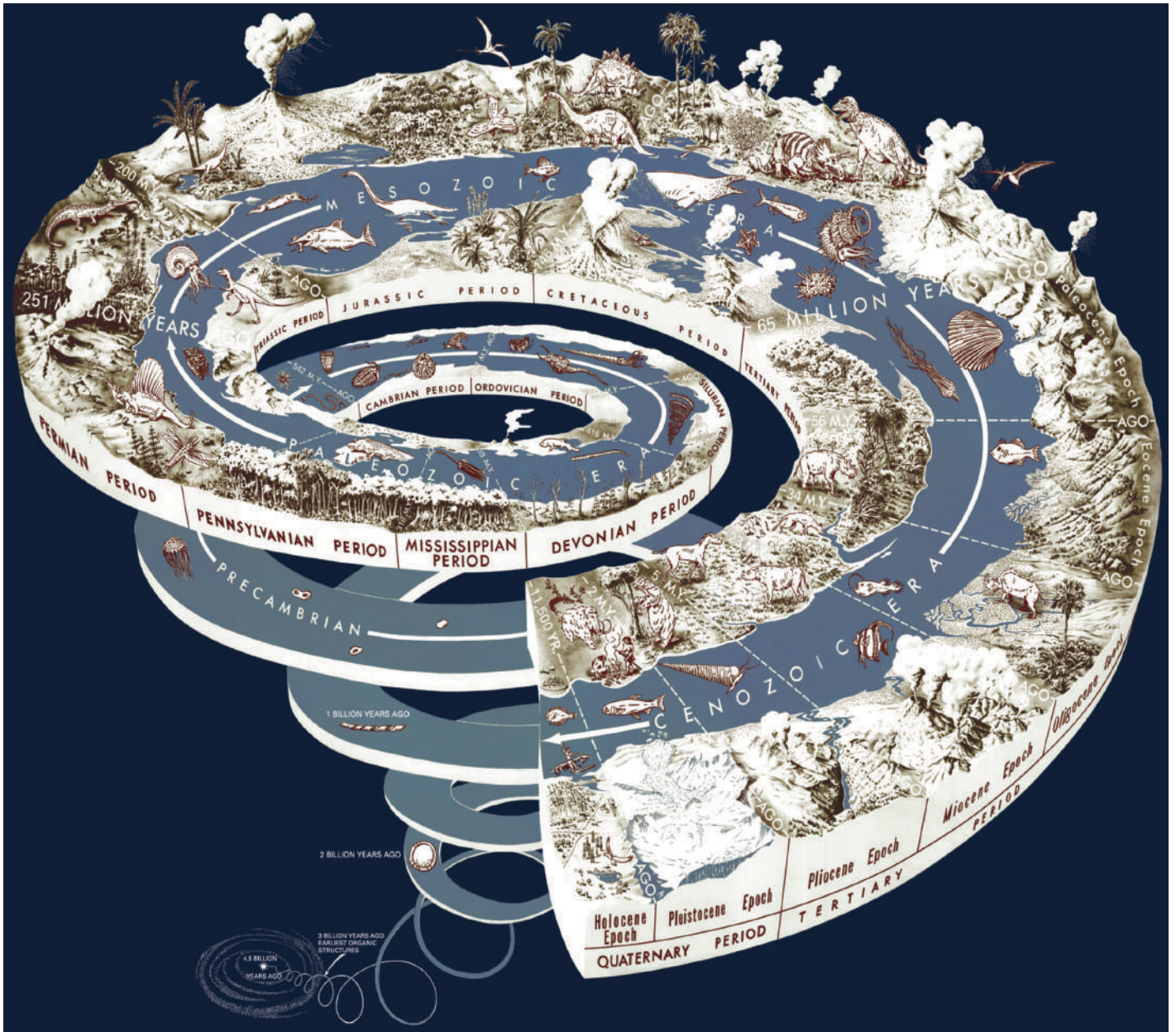


# THE AGE OF EMPIRE

## THEORY IN THE AUGHTIES

SUESPAID



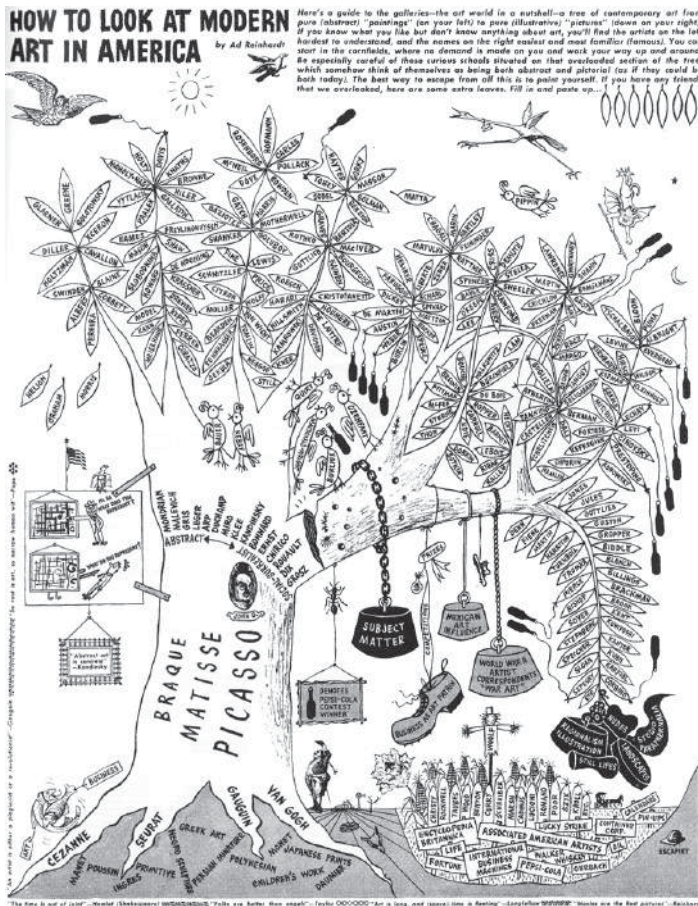
## FOR SOME TIME NOW,

I have noticed that artists produce innovative works during odd decades, while art theorists strut their stuff during even decades. There's a kind of built-in wobble between left- and right-brained tactics. Odd decades have been super-productive for art (anti-art in the teens, installation art in the thirties, participatory art in the fifties, video art in the seventies and antic art in the nineties), while art theory and theory-driven art such as minimalism or conceptual art tend to surface in even decades to explain, or articulate, artistic endeavors. I offer these events as evidence of even-decade texts: the *Surrealist Manifestos* (1924

and 1929), Clement Greenberg's "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (1939), Frankfurt School publications (1940s), Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), and dozens of 1980s theorists. Since Y2K, I have tried in vain to discover the key thoughts of "aughties" theory—though granted this dialectic already seems full of holes.

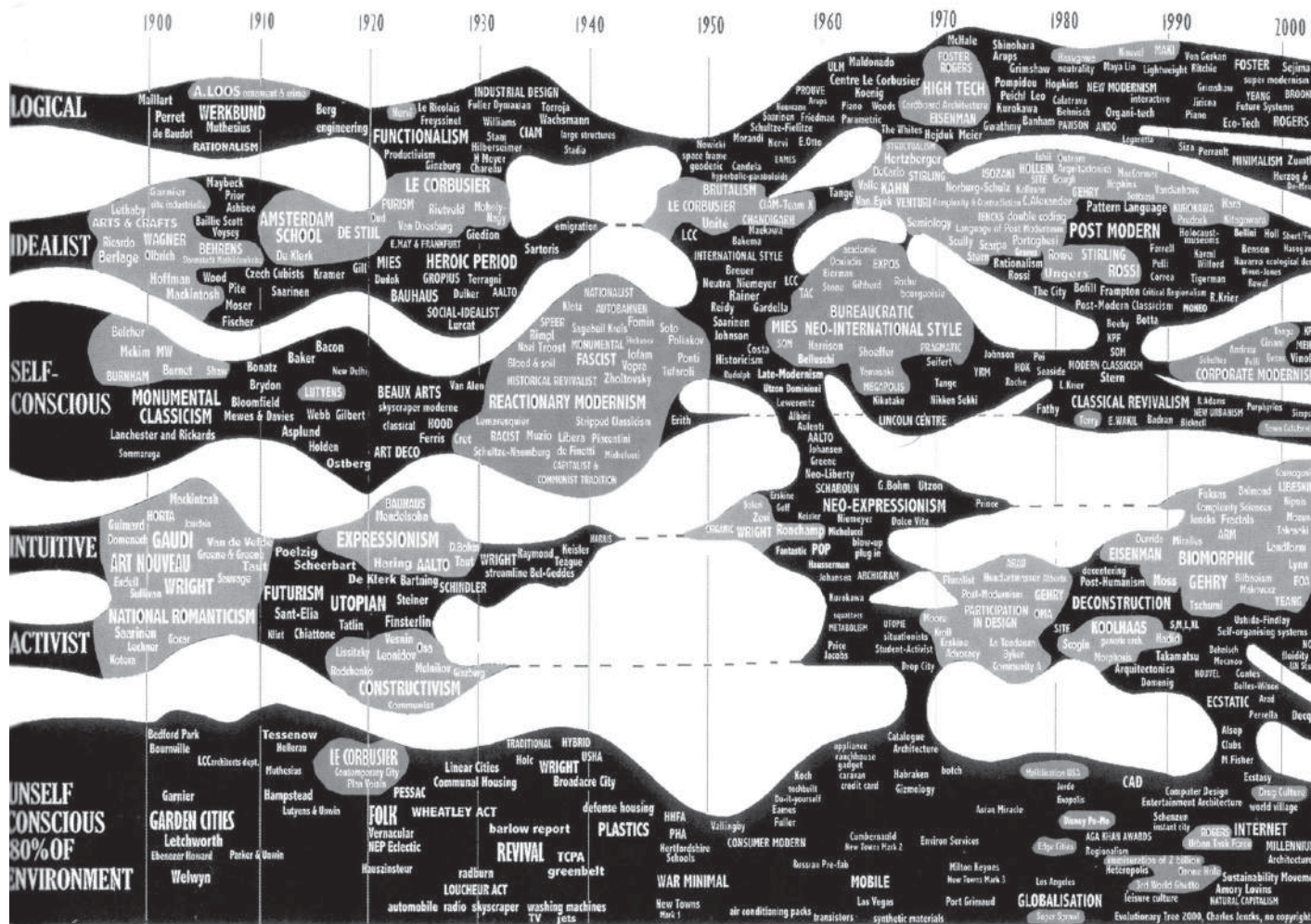
For my "wobble thesis" to be conceivable, decades can't last only ten years. Decades involve overlapping time. Taking the long view, semiotic analyses as applied to visual art first emerge with Mulvey's seminal essay, or even earlier with Roland Barthes's *Empire of Signs* (1966),<sup>1</sup> and finally winds down given the 1993 Whitney Biennial's emphasis on identity. My point is not that only theory is produced during even decades, but that writers responding to artistic or historical events effectively stress the need to read events through theory, thus concealing the primacy of practice or history. For

example, we tend to read the latent forms associated with Dada art and the 1938 "International Surrealist Exhibition" through the lens of the manifestos' manifest ideas, given their emphasis on madness, imagination, illogical juxtapositions, dream theory, and so on.<sup>2</sup> "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s" (1990) was





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organized to highlight eighties-era identity politics and semi-otic practices. In hindsight, however, the works' emphasis on multicultural difference seems rather exemplary of "third wave" resistance to eighties' anti-essentialism. Around the same time, Camille Paglia announced that women will never play guitar as well as men, despite the fact that dozens of female soloists and girl bands were then blasting off. Soloists Sheryl Crow, Chrissie Hynde, Natalie Merchant, Tori Amos, Exene Cervenka, Victoria Williams and Syd Straw advanced to center stage in the late 1980s from the background of mid-eighties acts that featured them (Michael Jackson's "Bad World Tour," The Pretenders, 10,000 Maniacs, Y Kant Tori Read, X and The Knitters, Giant Sand and The Golden Palominos, respectively).

Rather than artistic movements being distinct in time and intent, there are always multiple, contemporaneous movements, each with its particular, borrowed or shared, theories.

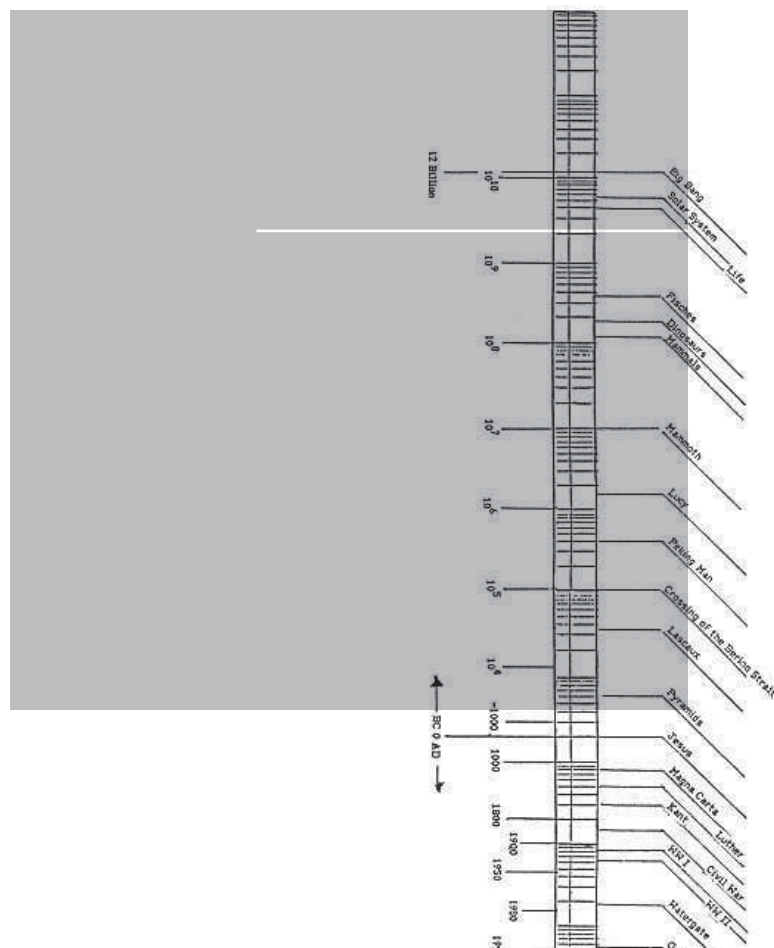
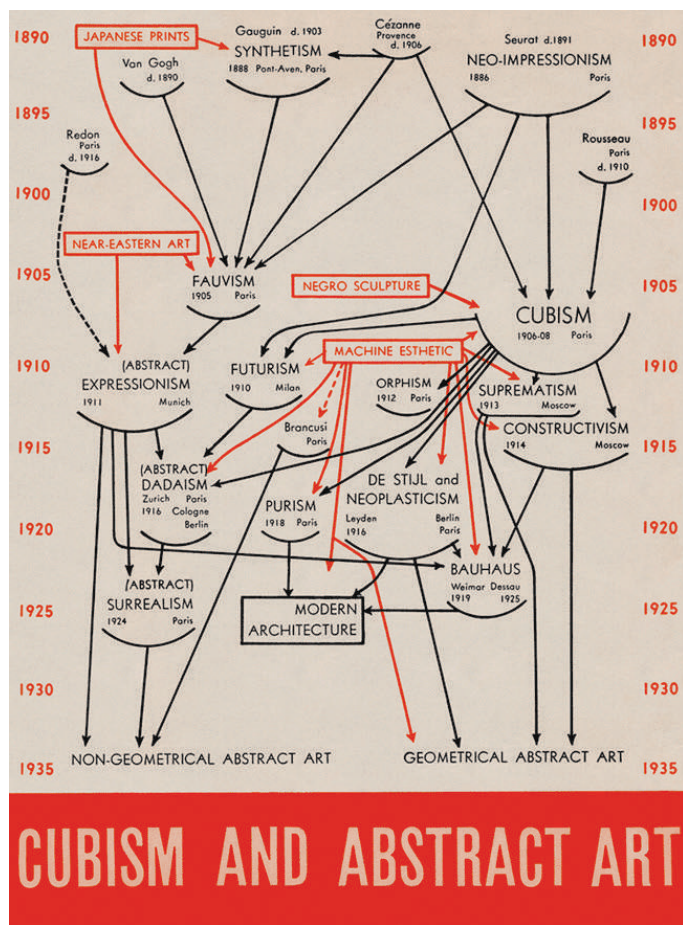
1. Barthes's theories depended entirely on preexisting cases, though the wholesale application of his ideas to eighties-era art (though penned in the 1950s) should not suggest that his theories anticipated art practices. If his theories applied, they did so because artists found fascination in a media-saturated world for which Barthes had independently developed useful tools.
2. See Breton's 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto*, <[www.tcf.uu.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm](http://www.tcf.uu.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm)>.
3. Parenthetically, Natascha Sadr Haghghian, whose two-channel video projection *Empire of the Senseless Part II* (2006) is in MoMA's permanent collection, seems both a "he" and a "she" of conflicting origins: compare the artist's Wikipedia entry with biographical note taken from <[www.bioswop.net](http://www.bioswop.net)>.

Art theorists are always latecomers, because the forces of change, whether artistic or historical, are already underfoot before others recognize them. This view challenges the totality of timelines, such as Alfred Barr's famous 1936 art chart, Charles Jencks's 2000 *The Century is Over, Evolutionary Tree of Twentieth-Century Architecture*, or the Tate Modern's global timeline (replete with errors) strewn above windows in its escalator spaces. Such timelines disguise the fact that any event/movement/genre/trend is already in full swing by the time third parties, such as writers, curators, galleries or collectors, can articulate it. Just as art writing is a record of "who thought what when," artworks are records of "who did what when," but most timelines are pegged to records such as exhibitions, essays, or buildings, not to the artworks or thought processes that make such exhibitions/essays/buildings inevitable.

As mentioned above, I have been awaiting other theorists' thoughts for a full decade now. With only ten days remaining before the aughties expired, I miraculously surfed up "How Philosophers Get Curated," an essay by Maja and Reuben Fowkes (MRF), published at <www.translocal.org>. Their essay not only names seven aughty theories, but it offers a clue as to why Berlin artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian is a 2010 Hugo Boss Prize finalist.<sup>3</sup> To follow are the trends MRF notice: (1) Curators curate philosophers into their projects, just as they select artworks. (2) Curators ransack philosophy "in search of intellectual models to serve as the conceptual grounding for their productions." (3) Artworlders notoriously distort philosophical ideas. (4) Philosophers are today's emperors (arbiters of taste). Critics have lost their clout. (5) Two types of curators exist: the curator *qua* art historian, which they term the "exhibition facilitator or administrator;" and the curator *qua* experience maker, which they term the "independent author." (6) Two types of philosophers exist: those who are armchair revolutionaries and those who are theorists in action.

(7) Finally, and most importantly for my purposes here, MRF offer *empire* as aughties theory, thus explaining why Haghghian's *Empire of the Senseless Part II* (2006) impressed the Boss nominators. Perfectly timed for the new millennium, MRF attribute empire as theory to the aughties trilogy: *Empire* (2000), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009), authored by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Such treatises on locating empire, surviving empire, and saving survivors were floating right under my nose.

MRF blame curators for recruiting philosophers—such as Giorgio Agamben (17), Alain Badiou (8), Pierre Bourdieu (8), Michael Hardt (15), Chantal Mouffe (3), Antonio Negri (18), Jacques Rancière (16), Paolo Virno (7), Slavoj Žižek (16), Jean Baudrillard (35) and Jacques Derrida (29)—to present papers



ALFRED H. BARR, JR., *CUBISM AND ABSTRACT ART* (NEW YORK, 1936), BOOK JACKET, WITH 8 ARROWS  
 REVISED HERE IN ACCORD WITH BARR'S 1941 UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPT ON THE ART CHART.





during art fairs, auctions, biennials, museum exhibitions and symposia. Bourdieu, whose cultural capital theory explains how collectors wield newfound power and prestige, seems perfectly suited to address market-oriented forums. Notably, MRF consider it a far worse offense when philosophers grant *Artforum* interviews. This enables “revolutionary theory [to be] in danger of losing ground through their authors’ participation in the most established art structures, even though they themselves might experience it as flattery.” (They seem to overlook philosophers’ mutually interdependent *Artforum* dalliances.) The above numbers in parenthesis indicate the number

of aughties *Artforum* articles that mentioned these philosophers. *Artforum* writers routinely refer to their ideas, which is presumably how curators and artists hear about them. Another relevant factor is the seminal journal and press *Semiotext(e)*, whose 1980s translations of Debord, Foucault, Baudrillard, and members of Italy’s Autonomia movement (such as Negri, Virno and others) have been devoured by artists and cultural theorists alike. During the 1990s *Semiotext(e)* primarily published literature, and only recently returned to theory, publishing mostly anti-capitalist invectives tied to the press’s earlier investment in post-Fordist paradigms associated with Autonomia.

In addition to *Artforum* and *Semiotext(e)* providing fodder for budding intellectuals, it wouldn’t be surprising if the number of art fairs has quadrupled, the number of biennials has doubled, and the number of potential art collectors has increased ten-fold since *Empire*’s advent. How can fair and exhibition organizers entertain the multitudes eager to learn more about contemporary art without recruiting additional presenters, such as philosophers whose texts intrigue the cognoscente. Unlike most artists and curators, philosophers actually lecture for a living, so they should be compelling speakers, whether or not they follow current art trends. At least when philosophers address market-oriented audiences, we need not worry that their ideas have been erroneously paraphrased or taken out of context. We might actually discover how little they care about contemporary art, or that they don’t actually see their ideas as having anything to do with art. Baudrillard told us so much when he spoke at the Whitney in 1985. Several philosophers have even had side gigs with museums. Jean-François Lyotard curated the impressive “Les Immatériels” at the Pompidou in 1985. Several museums



have invited Arthur Danto to curate exhibitions over the years.

If as MRF claim, Documenta XII curators Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack never credited Agamben for the “bare life” concept that is an underlying thread of their exhibition title, “What is Bare Life?”, the curators’ oversight is odd. Could it be that the curators heard the concept during one of their studio visits from an artist who mentioned it, unaware of the source? Such source-less concepts have run un-tethered in the art world since I joined it 25 years ago. But pinching ideas isn’t so much a crime as is claiming to originate a “stolen” idea, which they haven’t done, so both the curators and Agamben are safe, especially since both have the protection of published books. It’s when powerful pros pilfer unpublished ideas that clever idea generators—philosophers or not—really get screwed.

Since no curator worth his salt merely ransacks philosophy “in search of intellectual models to serve as the conceptual grounding for their productions,” MRF need not fret. However, the alternatives they propose simply consist of framing works in terms of medium, style, or representation. But medium is too vague (why can’t a video be a painting?), and style or aesthetics is mostly subjective (at least one needs to show why similar styles aren’t merely imitating one another). As for representation, art has never been about that: art historians, not artists, make art representational. Better, isn’t having a concept the same as demonstrating what the work represents? Inscrutable artworks, not impending exhibitions, trigger the curatorial or literary urge to ransack philosophy in search of concepts. Who isn’t interested in the question of whether theory wags practice or vice versa, but as discussed up front, theory always seems to arrive late. MRF are maybe right to see these as

increasingly separate spheres, especially when theories don't actually make reference to artworks. Art writers, who sprinkle their articles with theory, are not as complimentary or potentially authority-"bolstering" as MRF worry about. Why would any collector care which artists some philosopher prefers anymore than he cares what some curator picks or critic applauds?

MRF view as "cliché" the claim by distinguished art professor Boris Groys that criticism is not necessarily written down to be read. Is this a cliché to do with style (if it were written to be read then it would be easier to read) or with substance (no one cares what writers think)? In either case, Groys's notion of art writing as some "textual bikini" is downright obscene. Criticism is indeed written to be written, just as art is created to be created. Not unlike art, someone along the way must eventually read the text for it to play a role. Criticism forms the archive that generates the artwork's history as an event in the making.

The view that critics have lost their power is baseless. Any positive review by Roberta Smith, Jerry Saltz, David Pagel or Christopher Knight can sell out a show, just as Clement Greenberg used to do. There are hundreds or more critics but few have name recognition, let alone "say-so." Collectors have always wielded all the power; it is museum collection that determines art history. Is power what critics want? I can see critics wanting power to write about what they want to write about, to write about works how they want to write about them, or to publish the essay where they want. Rather than sway readers, it's more interesting to stir a debate or to find a platform where one can develop and distribute ideas inspired by artworks.

Call me radical, but I can't imagine why anyone would want to attend a show organized by an "exhibition facilitator." This sounds like a bunch of facts chasing objects. Why can't an exhibition be an experience on par with a movie, shopping at Ikea, or reading a book? Just as distinct actors inspire characters and scripts, artworks influence the curator's narrative. Although the auteur theory is inappropriate here, the curator/filmmaker analogy works, because the curator's primary role includes all or most of the following tasks: writing the script (essays, didactic panels, wall labels, etc.), casting the actors (selecting the appropriate artworks), directing the actors (overseeing commissions and designing audience experiences) and producing the show (writing grants). As Paul Foss remarks in his 2009 memoirs *The &-Files*, the film analogy extends even to magazine publishing, where the editor/publisher functions as the line producer, responsible for managing schedules, budgets, and precious

egos. The primary difference between the three worlds is that where exhibitions are ethereal, magazines come and go, while movies last forever (without mentioning the Internet, which is now beginning to grant online art discussion a kind of permanence.)

If movies can be "revolutionary," why can't art exhibitions be world shattering? MRF rebuke 2007 Istanbul Biennial curator Hou Hanrou's claim that his exhibition treats contemporary art as a "radical social agent, with artistic actions and the Biennial itself perceived as able to 'prompt cultural and social change' in the form of 'urban guerrilla strategy.'" MRF respond: "The curator's bold claim that the Istanbul Biennial is a 'project of collective intelligence, reflecting perfectly the



structure and function of the Multitude' runs the risk of over-identifying art with the aims of radical philosophy, and puts curating at the epicenter of global political transformation." What's so wrong with this, I say? If art doesn't identify with the aims of radical philosophy, then curators are just busting through capital, endorsing buddies, and failing to arouse anyone from their slumbers. Even as straightforward as Alfred Barr's shows looked, he was hardly just a "facilitator." ■

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