ACTIVISM, ART PRACTICE AND
THE VULNERABILITY OF MESSAGE

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University of Plymouth

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ACTIVISM, ART PRACTICE AND THE VULNERABILITY OF MESSAGE

By

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Activism, Art Practice and the Vulnerability of Message

This research project uses practical work and a supporting text to explore activism in contemporary art. Its chief concern is to consider what constitutes an activist art practice by clarifying the terms of engagement of such work. In the textual part of this submission the production of recent and contemporary artists who are widely presumed to make activist art has been examined. Their different approaches have been identified and critical evaluations of them have been offered. The artists under review include Christian Boltanski, Agnes Denes, Hans Haacke, Thomas Hirschhorn, Edward Kienholz, Doris Salcedo, and others. The analysis differentiates between them on the basis of their success as activist artists. Broadly speaking, two major strands of effective activism are identified. The first provides the audience/spectator with an understanding of their complicity in situations which are not clear-cut, where ethical standards are in conflict and where the perception of issues and solutions remains occluded. This kind of activism refuses any kind of programmatic clarity and encourages its viewer/recipient to acknowledge their moral and epistemological confusions. Although it may make use of local and particular circumstances and events its overall message transcends them and it is theoretically transportable to other sites without loss of impact. The second strand of activism is designed to work with maximum impact in highly localised situations, drawing on very particular shared experiences in tightly circumscribed locations. This kind of activist art, unlike the first, cannot be removed from its exact social and political context without loss of meaning. It is the contention of the thesis that successful activist art, in either strand, is very difficult to achieve and that much of what passes as activist art is flawed, either because it is crudely propagandic or because it is too opaque for the public to respond to it. The critical framework outlined in the textual submission is the matrix within which the practical element of this submission should be considered. The work submitted for examination extends the idea of activism as a means of making tangible the political and ethical confusions of everyday life. It is designed to be eye-catching, alluring and domineering, using scale, materials and iconography to encourage close inspection. The practical work offers the spectator a sculptural environment in which news reports, memories, moral beliefs, cultural stereotypes and historical markers are put in play. It is intended to provoke reflection, to linger in the memory, precisely because it cannot be categorised or assimilated easily as a simple message.
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I embarked on this course of study due to a belief that art has the potential to activate change for the better, and through a recognition that my own practice was failing to do this.

I would like to offer my thanks to Professor Sam Smiles and Dr Stephanie Pratt for their extraordinary guidance and hospitality. To Mike Lawson Smith for his advice and instruction, Graeme Thomson for his unfaltering patience and my children, Red Roses, Betty, Bear and Blitz for their love.
AUTHOR’S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

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Signed

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INTRODUCTION

As a way of providing benchmarks by which my own practice can be readjusted, the aim of this thesis is to examine the work and methodologies of artists who make work that might reasonably be said to fall into, or close to, an activist art practice. My choice of artists is reflective of those that I considered at the start of this research project to be the clearest examples of this genre. They were artists who made the kind of work that was nearer to where I felt my own practice should be. It appeared that there was a decisive, articulate and deeply provocative type of work which stretched audience perceptions and went beyond simply articulating wide-spread concerns. It was work that called for change in the most reasonable and belligerent and invasive and instructive way. However I came to identify problems which meant that in each case the work was not delivering what I hoped for it. Single issues often became exclusionary. The limitations of humour, the effects of time on aesthetic fashion, empathetic deficits and innumerable external climatic interferences all conspire to blunt these works. I have on occasion however strayed toward examining works outside of my own sphere in order to illustrate broader aspects of a genre that is susceptible to both superficial trends on the one hand, and on the other, orthodoxy so authoritative that it often makes conformist assumptions of its constituents.

I have become clear that the most effective and relevant way of reversing specific social and or political manifestations is not by making art specific to them, but by offering art a much bigger role in supporting a change in the way that decisions are made in the first place. This is a change which is being nudged along by a new accountability via transparency and information availability, both sanctioned and otherwise.
Dogma can be the deserving victim of such an evolving liberal consensus, one which is incompatible with the reality of the human condition, which is one of confusion, contradiction and chaotic thought. For dogma and certainty to become the absurd, as opposed to the norm, my intention is to illustrate my own internal chaos, which is a reflection of what I perceive around me. My intention is to sanction and legitimise the act of not knowing in an attempt to keep dogma at bay. In doing so the aesthetic of my practice has changed radically as I have attempted to use spectacle as a dominant engagement device. I have moved away from a direct narrative toward a series of queries that are sometimes related and sometimes not, a practical process which I expand upon in chapter seven.

This thesis analyses the practice of a series of artists in the light of this new methodology. How I discuss them comes from the vantage point of my own practice. The authorial voice within this thesis is not a disinterested one. Indeed it could be described as polemical and the thesis should not be read as an art historical text.

Throughout this project the theory has informed the practice and the practice has informed the theory, bringing the same criteria that I use to critique my own work as I do when critiquing that of others. The vast majority of this work, including those which I have found most problematic, is working within either the contextual or aesthetic or technical vicinity of my own studio practice and so it would be unrealistic to expect that this practice would not already have an established contextual and practical structure with tried technical constraints. All the works examined, hover on a sliding scale of potential. All are works that have the promise of a strident connectivity that could operate in a way that activates change. It is this potential to motivate an audience into requiring change for the wider betterment which is at the core of my research project.
I make no attempt in this thesis to define activist art practice because I have identified that there is no mechanical equilibrium that circumscribes a gravitational field of success, or otherwise. Environmental, political, sociological, emotional and historical circumstances do not allow for uniformed blueprints even within the two strands that I identify as having effective motivational potential. To suggest a definition would be to impose a structural tradition when it is those works I identify as coming closest to achieving the capacity for influencing change that have ventured furthest from a conventional praxis. Indeed a work to have the broadest constituency might seem like a pre-requisite for a successful activist work. To make art for an exclusive audience might seem counter intuitive. However works that speak to a limited audience who have specific knowledge of an event or situation can connect and force through change, as in the case of Doris Salcedo’s ‘Noviembre 6 y 7’ which I examine in chapter two. It is the ‘type’ not the size of the engagement that is central.

I have extrapolated from the works examined over the course of this research project that there can be no rules of engagement. Even the instinct not to conform to tradition swims too close to a fettered principle. That a work is ‘likely’ to effect substantial, significant and beneficial change would not determine the method, aesthetic or technique of successful work, but it would come close to suggesting an outcome that is particular. Nevertheless, what is substantial, significant or beneficial is subjective, and outcomes cannot always be judged contemporaneously. To certify that change is enduring, and therefore appropriate to the section of society which is encountering it, time must be allowed to pass. This makes the assessment process vulnerable to fashion and contextual distortion.
This thesis does not seek to arbitrate over the appropriate siting of art. Whether it should be in a bespoke space, a non traditional art space, driven around on the back of a truck, imposed, projected or posted is all down to the specific realities of the moment or the conditions. There are multifarious issues that render any space or situation both appropriate and problematic. These elements can have substantial bearing on the decisions that artists make, or are forced to make. However because this thesis reflects, answers to and informs my studio concerns, when I do discuss the siting of work, it is only to demonstrate the versatility of an artist's approach as well as the concept of a work being 'fit for purpose.' The geographical limitation that my dominant working methodology imposes on me makes an in-depth examination of the politics of the art space an extraneous diversion from the aim of this research project. My material and technical restrictions are for the most part self-imposed. I construct through a process of intuitive problem solving based around an unlimited, unrestricted decision-making process that uses both traditional and non traditional materials. The problem I attempt to solve is that of communication and the shortness of audience connectivity. The method is a process which attempts to ape the spontaneity of smaller, less technically involved works by ignoring a fundamental aspect of any material, that of its ability to withstand the elements. My only consideration of materials is for their availability and their cost and weight. Whether an object that I make is vandal-proof or weather-proof is not a consideration in the pattern of my process of making. As well as being a system for the replacement of the instinctive and impulsive, it is also a way of allowing the object a clearer path toward aesthetic evolution.

The repetitive and time-consuming processes evident in my objects become ritualistic responses to surface and form and context, rituals that allude to
commitment and attempt to invite allegiance. This is an inclusivity of availability, both in terms of the cheapness and accessibility of materials, and of required aptitude, albeit one which is well honed and hopefully worthy of admiration, which is an engagement device in itself.

The two pieces presented for examination and illustrated in this thesis, ‘Not Knowing’ (2009-2010)(fig 1, int) and ‘Not Knowing with Gusto,’ (2008-2010)(fig 2, int) would not survive the elements, or an unsupervised site. The types of site, be it an established gallery, a space temporarily turned into a gallery, or a non art space which conforms to its needs, would all bring with them hypothetical elements that are highly specific. These two pieces should therefore be contemplated as objects to be viewed inside a secure environment. Other than the fact that it is the use of inclusive materials that has made this the case, there should be no political inference drawn from this.

This thesis examines overtly political pieces of art. Indeed Hans Haacke’s work not only critiques the politics of Glasnost and German reunification, as witnessed in ‘Freedom will now be Sponsored through Petty Cash’ (1990), but even examines the morality of British export policy in the 1970’s in ‘A Breed Apart,’ (1978). Both pieces are explored in chapter three. Nevertheless, ‘Not knowing,’ and ‘Not Knowing with Gusto,’ are not political works by inception. The fact that imagery included within them reflects political machinations is a result of the maker, in this cases me, being politically engaged. For the work not to have the feel of a political meditation would render the work inauthentic. These two works use my own chaotic understanding of the world in an overtly personal manner, using biography as an engagement device. Just as the rhythm of ritualistic over-production is used to invoke assurance and dedication, so too are the chaotic strands used to suggest personal experience or
concern. The intimacy and implied confidentiality of my burden is exploited in order to encourage the viewer to spend time listening. However the trauma of events as described in the photographic self-portrait in 'Not Knowing,' (fig 3. Int) which contains the legend, 'I saw a man have his head cut off and it's never bothered me,' is not intended to guide the viewer to a specific historical moment or incident. It is meant as a confidence, the sharing of a secret, albeit an extreme one. It is not the trauma that is the subject, but the shared secret. It is the incomprehensibility of the trauma and not the politics or circumstances of the events that is being reconnoitred. In 'Not Knowing with Gusto,' amongst the legion of what I have come to describe as 'thought barnacles,' which are seemingly incidental visual or textual impulses, there are images from three dominant events presented, none of which I witnessed. There is the 2007 execution of Majid Kavousifar in Iran who went to the gallows smiling and waving to his family and friends. There is the 1999 execution in America of Allen Lee Davis whose nose famously bled during his electrocution, and there is the un-lawful killing of the newspaper vendor Ian Tomlinson in London in 2010 after having been pushed to the ground by a member of the Metropolitan Police force. All three of these events are personally troublesome, although unifyingly inexplicable. Brought together with the rest of the 'barnacles,' they are intended to traverse a horde of questions for which there are multiple, parallel answers. These works do not aim to expose the politics of trauma, or the politics that result in trauma, but the confusion of impulses that arise out of the trauma.

In themselves, these two works are not proposing a political notion in terms of advocating an alternative system or authoritative model. In attempting to legitimise loose thought and antithetical and incompatible impulses they do however conform to a political critique in terms of suggesting a broader more sustainable fundamental
change. This is however, a remote methodology which aims to distance itself from the exclusively political faithfulness that has led to much of the work that I have examined in this thesis to lean heavily toward the propagandistic.

Having explored the pit-falls that often dog activist art, and having been impressed by the recent work of Thomas Hirschhorn and his readings of Georges Bataille and Gilles Deleuze, the aim of this research project evolved into the search for a way to make art that is insidious. To make art objects or installations that exploit any device to draw in as wide an audience as possible but which do not speak directly or specifically, but which instead set a tone by which discordant elements within the work might reveal themselves long after the viewer has left the art space.
I have selected a stable of artists who have either been positioned as activists, or present themselves as such. In order to make this survey productive in terms of my own practice it is necessary to subject these artists to a severe analysis. It is easy to make a superficial connection between the work of Christian Boltanski and the Holocaust, which would indicate a moral agenda, but he does not make art either in the service of social change, or as a way of keeping history alive in order that it should not repeat itself. Although he does allow himself to be used by institutions that serve a social mission, his compliance with the distortions that these institutions have to make in order to place his work into a neat popular overview, fits conveniently with his overarching paradigm of the subconscious exploitation of truth.

The beauty and seduction of his work which has afforded him global success is a secondary device that frames the subversive qualities of memory. There can be little doubt that Boltanski's work is emotionally and visually engaging. Its broad appeal is in part due to the way in which it taps into the collective imagination and mixes popular, religious and cultural practices with a homespun do-it-yourself easy aesthetic. The unspoken but clear religious references in his work play a populist tune that captures the warmth of melancholia but without the discomfort of what Francis Bacon described as, "the brutality of fact." ¹ In this sense he does conform to a very narrow definition of what an activist approach could be by breaking down disciplinary specialisations and reconfiguring the relationship between artist and viewer so creating a contract of emotions that Grant H Kesler describes as "meaning production." ² However, this understanding between maker and looker sees Boltanski falling someway short of the embrace of reality, a prerequisite of activist
art. His continual need to reinvent his past supersedes any concern for the realities of the present. In formally playing fast and loose with the truth, his work is vulnerable to interpretation and exploitation. While this blurring of facts is key to his wider aims, there are risks involved.

In continually refusing to present the viewer with his opinion, Boltanski offers the ill informed a get-out clause. Whether it is by his reengineering of his identity through his ‘Comical Sketches’ of 1974, or by his trademark reframing of absence, he is not offering up anything substantive. The breadth of his captured audience are at best what John Czaplicka calls “memory tourists” and at worst those suffering from what John Mowit identifies as “trauma envy” part of what Mark Selzer identifies as an emerging “wound culture.”

When questioned about his childhood for The South Bank Show in 1994, Boltanski famously insisted that there was “nothing to know” and claimed that there was no relationship between the life of an artist and his or her work. For some artists their background has no relevance in their future careers and in surveying their work a cursory biographical contextualisation will suffice. But because all Boltanski’s work is supported by his understanding of the role of memory which is informed by his own experiences, both environmentally and circumstantially, and because there is an element of role-play and performance not only in the art work but in the statements he makes about it, it is not possible to find understanding of his output without a broader examination of his life.

In 1968 Christian Boltanski was twenty four. Significantly he was not one of the 800,000 students, teachers or workers who marched through the streets of Paris
demanding social and political change. He was not one of those who chanted "C R S-S S" comparing the riot police to the Nazis. Instead he was busied by his exhibition at the Ranelagh, an avant-garde cinema in the riot-free sixteenth arrondissement. Here he exhibited a collection of naive paintings and a short super eight film 'The Impossible Life of Christian Boltanski.'

Boltanski's unwillingness to take a role in the unravelling social history of his country did not dampen his enthusiastic assertion of his place within the subversive traditions of his chosen profession. He became a figurehead for a loose grouping of artists who in recognising the shift of influence away from Paris to New York, sought to capitalise on their new found marginality. In attempting to make their status as outsiders a defining tag, they set about finding ways to publicise their ideas through circumnavigating traditional outlets. They infiltrated newspapers, held not so secret, secret meetings and broadcast false news. In 1969 Boltanski and Jean Le Gac collaborated on two projects. During the 6th Paris Biennial they took part in a performance at the American Centre in Paris, which they entitled 'Work In Progress.' Spectators were invited to plant, and then uproot 1000 little pink sticks. This was no protest against the American military's continuing use of toxic defoliants in Vietnam and Cambodia or even a simple peace protest. It was far more a theoretical, albeit absurdist foray into notions of viewer interaction. Their following work was the installation 'Grant in Perpetuity' which was only ever seen by Boltanski and Le Gac.

In aping so closely the behavioural vocabulary of the protesters, Boltanski and his colleagues could be judged to have trivialised and mocked the efforts of the activists on the streets. That in 1970, Boltanski accepts the embrace of the Musée d' Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and exhibits 'Reference Vitrine' is suggestive of an element of otherness, of detachment and perhaps even shallowness which he does
little to refute. "Artists must be a little outside of reality and to be inside his own head and dreaming." Nevertheless, the superficial accessibility of his work came to be viewed as representing the kind of democratising content that was part of a debate in France in the early 1970’s surrounding the function of Museums. That this debate led to the construction of the Pompidou Centre meant that Boltanski’s profile was bolstered in a way that would have been inconceivable prior to the unrest of 1968. Indeed he had a solo exhibition at the Pompidou Centre in 1976, a year before its official opening.

Boltanski employed a significant element of design in realising his early career aspirations, and his detachment, his ‘outside of reality,’ is part construct, part reality, as if he is exploiting his own emotional scars. But this detachment is not nihilistic per se, rather a numbness born out of what we are led to believe anecdotally, was a childhood trauma. It is these memories with which Boltanski experiments, mixing the personal with the collective. The Holocaust is the most convenient collective trauma on which to experiment because it is the originator, if not the deliverer of his initial trauma. It also has sufficient grey areas within scholarly research that the vagaries of witness and survivor memories reinforce his thesis. In this laboratory, Boltanski’s distinct trauma becomes unimportant as it is superseded by the hugeness of events. Janis Bergman-Carton suggests that Boltanski’s “personal embraces are snuffed out by the master narratives of historical memory.” It is the role that these unreliable ‘embraces’ should play in the ‘master narratives’ that is central to Boltanski’s work.

The often quoted story of Boltanski’s early days is harrowing but not necessarily accurate. Christian Libertie Boltanski was born on the day of the liberation of Paris in 1944. His mother was a Corsican Catholic and his father a Jew of Ukrainian ancestry
who spent much of the war years hiding in the basement or under the floor boards of their spacious Parisian home. Christian was home educated from the age of eleven. Such was the fear of anti-Semitism that he and his siblings slept in sleeping bags in their parent's bedroom. He did not venture out of his home unaccompanied until the age of eighteen. His father, a doctor, would be accompanied to and from hospital by the family and during private visits to patients they would wait outside for him.

Contradictions and factual inaccuracies are not only the language he uses in his relationship with the outside world, but reinvention is also a therapy that has allowed him a continuum. The specifics of the holocaust are unimportant to Boltanski's practice. Whether his father was a Jew or a convert to Catholicism is unimportant. What is relevant is that something in the Boltanski household led to what would now be classified as an abusive upbringing. To call it paranoia would be to ignore the climate in post-liberation France which was one far removed from the liberal emancipation that the French state's reinvention of history would have us believe.

But it would appear that domestically, contact with external reality was limited. Ernst van Alphen cites an interview Boltanski gave in which he talks about trying to erase his childhood. "you know it was so tough, it was so awful, I mean all our parents are awful, but my father was so awful, my mother was so awful." He grew up somewhere between truth and fiction, dominated by threats real or imagined. He grew up in a state of post Holocaust psychosis.

For Boltanski the Holocaust represents year zero, making everything subsequently incomprehensible. He is often quoted as describing his work as 'Post Holocaust.' Just as Poll Pot attempted in 1975, the Holocaust for Boltanski represents a fracturing of history, and this is key to understanding how close his practice comes to making a significant contribution to activist art.
The vagaries and visual anomalies in much of Boltanski’s works which reference far more identifiably the Holocaust, are not deliberate attempts to make the works live in a broader, more universal arena. They are unspecific because they are ‘of,’ not ‘about,’ the Holocaust. For him the Holocaust is what Alphen describes as, “unreadable-incomprehensible. It is a hopeless project,” and suggests the “impossibility of having a detached position from it.” But in an interview with Gjessing Steiner, Boltanski said, “In the 19th century it was possible to believe in a moral utopia and a scientific utopia. Today we have lost everything—we have no more hope.” And so it is little wonder that Boltanski’s vision of the future, of a “sublime chaos that cannot be ordered” does not accommodate the characteristics of morality or justice. As far as we should trust the sincerity of anything Boltanski is recorded to have said, hopelessness does punctuate his output. Moral certainties have not been a part of his life either as a child, or as an adult living and working in France.

Being a French Jew is critical to the understanding of his practice. Issues surrounding his status and his nation’s role in the application of that status not only define his work but illuminate its difficulties. His refusal to engage in any form of contemporary commentary or critique is not only down to the hopelessness with which he views the present. It is because, just as his father did, he is also in hiding, gripping the truth close to his breast and only allowing it to walk unaccompanied when it is wearing a veneer of inexactitude and ambiguity. Just as he used his ‘Comical Sketches’ in the refashioning and reinvention of his early years into a more palatable universal childhood, he uses photography as an emblem of misplaced trust, a medium that can easily be manipulated. One with which he explores what
Janis Bergman-Carton describes as "history's potential to diminish, rather than strengthen memory."^13

Boltanski continually suggests that the picture lies, being hostage to the anonymous photographer whose split second decisions are filtered through an unknown set of priorities and agendas. But for Boltanski, it is more than simple recognition of, "the fallacy of the singular perspective."^14 It has more to do with being the citizen of a country in denial, a country like himself, in hiding. Like Boltanski, France has reinvented itself, and like him, by disengaging from any meaningful debate, it came close to believing its own fantasy construct.

Boltanski was asked why it had taken him so long to mention his Jewishness. He replied that he had been "scared."^15 Indeed it was not until 1983 that official French school textbooks were revised to include the facts surrounding France's complicity in the Holocaust. Details of the 10,000 Jewish children and babies that were rounded up by the French police and sent to their deaths came into mainstream education. This was accompanied by a reinvigorated wave of research into wartime anti-Semitism which produced a new and damming judgement of Marshal Pétain and the Vichy government.

In 1985 Claude Lanzmann made 'Shoah,' a nine and a half hour documentary which relied on the filmed testimonies of Holocaust survivors. The film was a huge national and international success. Simone de Beauvoir described it in Le Monde as a 'masterpiece.' In 1988 Marcel Ophul's documentary 'Terminus 2' about the life and trial of Klaus Barbie received critical acclaim and in the same year the most popular film showing in French cinemas was Louis Malle's 'Au Revoir Les Enfants.' This was about a twelve year old Jewish boy hiding as a Catholic boarder before being given
up to the Gestapo by the school’s kitchen porter. In the same year, Boltanski made ‘Chases High School’ and ‘Canada.’ Both these pieces exhibit for the first time what Ernst van Alphen calls the ‘Holocaust-effect’[^16] to which I shall return later in this chapter.

In ‘Chases High School’ 1988 (fig 1.1) Boltanski re-photographed a series of school portraits taken of Jewish children in Vienna in 1931. He uses angle lamps and the distortion of over-enlargement as theatrical devices. In ‘Canada’ 1988 (fig 2.1) he uses heaps of clothes to reference the depots where the Nazi’s stored the personal effects of the deported. ‘Canada’ was commissioned by Ydessa Hendeles for the inauguration of her ‘Hendeles’ Foundation in Toronto. Hendeles is the daughter of a prisoner who was tasked with sorting the clothing of the deportees. Boltanski uses an element of word play in the title, the Nazi’s having used the word ‘Kanada’ for these depots. Such is the unambiguous nature of this work that Shelly Hornstein suggests that Hendeles’ purchase sees her become “an agent between herself and her parent’s past, performing a critical act of remembering.”[^17] These two works clearly do more than just frame loss. They overtly reference the Holocaust. Didier Semin suggests that a large portion of Boltanski’s output since the late 1980, is “unequivocally as suggestive of the extermination camps.”[^18]

Lynn Gumpert sees earlier works such as ‘Photo Album of the Family D’ (1971)(fig 3.2), and ‘Inventory of Objects that Belonged to a Woman of Bois-Colombes,’(1974), as confronting the realities of French collaboration. The everyday ephemera of an unknown woman in Bois-Colombe and the’ D’ family’s photo album represent a normality that belies the extraordinary events, events disconnected from polite domestic utilitarian objects. Gumpert suggests that in these works, Boltanski is asking some awkward questions. What were they doing during the occupation?

[^16]: "Holocaust-effect"
[^17]: "an agent between herself and her parent’s past, performing a critical act of remembering."
[^18]: "unequivocally as suggestive of the extermination camps."
'Detective' (1988), is a work that gets closest to Boltanski's ambivalence toward received history. In it he mixes up photographs of murder victims with those of the murderers. Unlike with 'Sans -Souci' (1991) (fig 4.1) where he presents domestic photographs of smiling uniformed SS men implying that we are all somehow capable of the worst of Nazi excesses, in 'Detective,' the delineation is further blurred. The implication is not only that we look the same, but that we are the same, that one cannot always be sure who are the good guys and who are the bad. He suggests that we are all intrinsically good and at the same time bad, and that we do not need a particularly extraordinary set of circumstances to bring one or the other facet to the fore. This bleak outlook is born of a climate of deceit where the state has had to wrestle in a fog of culpability.

Even the Jewish establishment has been forced to defend itself. New research has called for the re-examination of long closed files which include the archives of the U.G.I.F (Union Générale des Isrealites de France). Suspicion has been raised by Jews who came from poor immigrant families that the U.G.I.F collaborated to secure the established French community by betraying them. Two post war 'Jury of Honours' have cleared the U. G. I. F. leaders, but doubts remain. What Ghassan Hage terms the "moral superiority" of the victim has been called into question.

For Boltanski, the only continuity is confusion and contradiction. The simmering anti-Semitism that shaped his young life, either real or imagined, meant that there was no liberation for Boltanski, even his middle name, 'Libertie' was an inaccurate contrivance. And the 'Liberation,' which saw the birth of a newly won free liberal society, also created the circumstances that led to the Setif Massacre. The vacuum between the Third Republic's collapse in 1940 and the creation of the Fourth in 1946 saw French troops in Algeria murder as many as 45,000 Algerians only weeks after
the German surrender in Europe. The massacre led to the struggle for independence when more than 1.5 million Algerians were killed, many tortured by French troops. In 2005 Algerian President Addelaziz Bouteflika claimed that France had used crematoriums in Algeria similar to those used during the Nazi regime. France denies that genocide took place, but Boltanski's disengagement runs parallel to the uncertainties that regular historical disclosures throw up.

Traditional news media can be vulnerable to distortion and exploitation. The television footage of the killing of the 12 year old Palestinian boy, Muhammad al-Durrah (fig 5.1) in September 2000 has what Doreen Carrajal described in The New York Times as "the iconic power of a battle flag." It was filmed by 'France 2' who were one of ten film crews present at the riot and subsequent fire fight between the Israeli army and the Palestinian security forces. Discrepancies based around time lines, the history of the injuries sustained by Muhammad's father in the same incident as well as forensic examinations of the raw footage continue to cast doubt on the accuracy of the original reporting. Most notable is a documentary by ARD Films broadcast in March 2009, 'The Child, the Death, and the Truth,' which was shortlisted in September 2009 for an award by the Association of International Broadcasting. Whether Muhammad al-Durrah was killed by the Israeli army, or it was staged or indeed perpetrated by the Palestinians is not clear. But it is unlikely that the incident would have taken place were it not for the exaggerated media presence which both incited, and offered a platform.

Incidents like this highlight the unreliability of images, which is a core theme of Boltanski's practice. But conversely, the re-enactment of loss, which is a motif found
regularly in his work, no longer has the same value now that events can be witnessed globally, in real time and often in the presence of non-governmental organisations and independent monitoring teams. This does not place this reportage faultlessly or necessarily even scrupulously within an historical archive, but it does facilitate a short hand, albeit an often superficial one, of empathy, solidarity and even metaphor. For example we can compare Boltanski’s installation ‘Lake of the Dead,’ (1990), which consisted of thousands of second-hand garments strewn across a vast area at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Nagoya, Japan, and a photograph that appeared in The Independent newspaper on April the 8th 1999 by John Voos which showed a landscape of discarded clothes left behind at a refugee camp at Blace on the Macedonia-Kosovo border after 30,000 Kosovans had ‘gone missing.’ The similarities between the two are extraordinary. They are virtually the same image. If one were to reverse the dates of the two, and hypothesise that Boltanski would had seen Voos’s photograph, it then becomes difficult to imagine that he could have made his installation. To have done so would have been coarse and asinine. But even without this hypothetical reversal, the fact remains that ‘Lake of the Dead’ is art, and Voos’ photograph is reportage. And unless the art itself becomes the news, which is a device sometimes adopted by career-minded artists, reportage has a much larger constituency than art.

The Boltanski melancholia machine is globally successful. His work is beautiful and seemingly inoffensive and although he is easily mistaken for an activist, the fact that he does not fit this categorization should not in itself detract intrinsically from his contribution. But because he is disengaged and actively encourages interpretation, integrity can be compromised. Boltanski’s work is at its most insipid when it is at its
most dogmatically unconfrontational, when it seeks to accommodate. This was best
highlighted during the installation of 'Museum of the Bar Mitzvah' (1993), at the
Jewish Museum in Manhattan. It is a curious episode that demonstrates that even
when he comes close to engaging in contemporary commentary, his inclination
toward the safety of the inoffensive renders him vulnerable to manipulation.

In his South Bank interview he explained that in presenting the ephemera of the bar
mitzvah he wanted to make a joke about how in America it had become largely a
social event where ostentatious displays of wealth have replaced the religious
meaning and content. He made it clear to the curatorial staff in his initial meetings
that his intention was to include only photographs of the parties and receptions that
take place after the bar mitzvah and that he wanted to have a glass display case
devoted purely to the conspicuously and typically expensive bar mitzvah gifts such
as computers and electronic toys. But Boltanski left the job of gathering all of the
objects and photographs to the discretion of the curatorial staff. Julie H Reiss, one of
the curators tasked with this writes that, "Boltanski’s limited involvement in the
production allowed the museum to significantly reinterpret the project." The
curators felt that Boltanski was ignoring what they saw as the serious scholarly
aspect of the bar mitzvah and so included photographs of orthodox children reading
from the texts and selected less flamboyant presents for the display case such as
pen knives, sweets and watches. Reiss claims that Boltanski "voiced no objection to
(indeed, did not comment on) the museum’s selections." The accompanying press
release described Boltanski as having chosen the images and objects.

Shimon Attie however provides an example of what happens when these
compromises are not made. In 1991 Attie projected images of pre war Jewish street
life onto their original Berlin sites. The work was entitled 'The Writing on The Wall.'
Although the Berlin project was short lived, a record of the work was shown globally in major museums which included the New York Museum of Modern Art. However no major Israeli museum would entertain this work. Tami Katz-Freiman suggests that, "Israel prefers to remember the gas chambers rather than the richness and intricacy of pre-war Jewish life in Europe." Unlike Attie, Boltanski has been embraced by the Israel Museum in Jerusalem exhibiting there in 1973, 1982 and 1989. Katz-Freiman claims that this is, "because his work alludes to the holocaust in a non-specific way and is universal in nature." The non-specificity in Boltanski's work represents an acceptable post-holocaust aesthetic that gives the viewer sufficient pointers to determine which genocide they are facing, but with insufficient detail to risk debate. Boltanski plays safe, preaching nothing, even to those who do not need converting. Attie's 'The Writing on The Wall,' is too porous, its diasporal imagery and even its title having the potential for uncomfortable examinations of contemporary Israeli policies.

Boltanski's failure to protect his vision for 'The Museum of Bar Mitzvah' calls into question how seriously his practice should be considered. Such a lack of professional and creative integrity can in part be explained by his painful view of the present in response to his past, when the lack of adherence to contemporary ethical principals allows for a less systematic but more chaotic autodidactic embrace by the viewer. The ambiguities in his practice leave a dangerous void, and the careless regard he holds for conceptual integrity, as witnessed in 'Museum of the Bar Mitzvah,' represents a schizophrenic attitude toward his own function.

Boltanski's Berlin installation 'The Missing House' (fig 6.1) was part of a city wide project, 'Die Endlichkeit der Freiheit,' (The Furniture Of Freedom) in the autumn of 1990. The project was conceived by Rebecca Horn, Januis Kounellis and Heiner
Müller and was intended to invite a response from the international art community to events surrounding the collapse of the Berlin wall. The brief was to create an interlocking web of artworks that spanned the old borders of the city in a broad commentary on the recent reunification. It was not intended to be a revisiting of Germany's past. Boltanski's invitation to contribute to the project is an example of how his practice can be miscategorised by the gravitas implied by his work's initial visual perception. His inclusion amongst the other thirteen artists who included Hans Haacke, Barbara Kruger, Olaf Menzel, Agnes Denes, Jochen Gerz and Krzysztof Wodiczko who can all be described as activist artists, only highlights Boltanski's difference.

Wodiczko's approach to his brief was to project an image of a newly consumer-driven East German man complete with overflowing shopping trolley, onto a statue of Lenin.

Hans Haacke requisitioned a defunct watchtower that overlooked what had been no-man's land between East and West Berlin. On the West-facing side of it he inscribed the piece's title, 'Die Freiheit wird jetzt einfach gesponsert-ans der portokasse' (Now freedom will be simply sponsored-from petty cash), (fig 7.1).

Boltanski's contribution consisted of two elements on either side of the city, 'The Missing House' and 'The Museum.' For 'The Missing House' he had name plates attached onto the remaining walls that frame a bomb site which, prior to an Allied raid in 1945, had been 15-16 Grosse Hamburgerstrasse in an historically Jewish part of the east of the city. The plates included details of the professions and the dates in which the last inhabitants lived at this address. The 'Museum' in the West was made
up of ten vitrines containing documentary and photographic inventories of the lives, interrogations and deportations of the Hambergerstrasse households.

'Missing House' is one of only two works that remained after the 'Die Endlichkeit' project ended and it represents some of the inherent problems in Boltanski's art. In becoming essentially a memorial, the context of 'The Missing House' shifted from simply being one element in a well publicised Avant-Garde art event, to that of a place of pilgrimage, of contemplation and of remembrance. However, Abigail Solomon-Godeau finds it, "troublingly enigmatic." With the vitrines that hold the significance of the plot across the other side of the city, and without even any explanation as to why 'The Missing House' is missing, the potential for disengagement or even misinterpretation by the uninformed viewer becomes a possibility. More worrying is an equivocation that Solomon-Godeau argues, "elides distinctions between Berlin Jews deported to concentration camps and the Germans who subsequently occupied their homes." She is concerned that this renders the piece "ethically compromised by its generic commemoration." Indeed Boltanski claimed that 'The Missing House' had nothing to do with Berlin Jews, "what interested me about this project was that you can take any home in Paris, New York or Berlin and with that one house, you can reconstruct an entire historical situation." This statement is an anti-historical statement that fits the paradigm that Boltanski's work promotes and calls into question the wisdom of his inclusion in the 'Die Endlichkeit' project. It highlights a sloppiness and an incaution which should not be mistaken for the deliberate illustration of contradiction. Solomon-Godeau queries, "the carelessness with which the artist sometimes does use narrative, historical evidence, in tandem with memorial images." What Ernst van Alphen describes as Boltanski's "Holocaust-effect" is more than just the dismissal of subjectivity which
Jill Bennett cautions is, "always vulnerable to appropriation, to reduction, and to mimicry." The 'Holocaust-effect' engenders a sense of loss but with just enough historical and ethnic clues to inform the viewer that it is not the Algerian or Rwandan Genocide that they are being asked to consider, and with enough information to undermine Boltanski's attempts at total detachment. This castrates his intent by veiling any remaining narrative, what Michael Newman claims is the, "erosion, rather than the preservation of historical memory." But the tight-rope on which Boltanski treads is one which advocates exactly this erosion and rejection of history as a trusted and instructive force, but crucially without the denial of its principal features. The weakness of this extended thesis would leave us with an eviscerated narrative. In the case of Muhammed al-Durrah's killing for example, all we would be left with is the fact that a child probably died during a fire fight. Arguably this would resonate more broadly since the specifics of the local political and circumstantial machinations as well as the audience's allegiances would have been removed. It is this removal by Boltanski of meaning hooks that makes his use of the holocaust as a short-hand for extreme events, essential for him. What we are told by him of his first-hand experience of it, an account which by his own thesis should not be trusted, is a biographical barb which enables the viewer a level of connectivity which is neither unreserved nor entirely dispassionate. We trust Boltanski's lack of faith because he was there. But in believing he was, we become part of his proposition, and so rather than simply illustrating uncertainty, the viewer helps him to manufacture it.

The series of photographs of smiling uniformed Nazi soldiers in domestic settings and presented as loving husbands and attentive fathers in 'Sans-Souci,' rather than being a deliberate attempt by Boltanski to set up an historical juxtaposition that
makes us question our perceptions, is in fact more simply pointing to the futility of trying to understand the Nazi psyche through so capricious a tool as the camera. This broadly fits Boltanski’s thesis, that of the mendacity of memory. Nevertheless, the fact remains that this work, seen in its simplest most superficial reading, shows Nazi soldiers in a good light. For this not to be a risky exercise one would have to make assumptions about the viewer’s understanding of the limitations of the photographic medium. Ernst van Alphen finds that the difficulty of reading the Nazi psych in ‘Sans-Souci’ is due to Boltanski’s, “disinterest in ascribing blame to the Nazi’s.” Were this to be the case it would identify a level of subjectivity that goes far beyond a simple disengaged cynicism. But if we view this in parallel with his claims that ‘The Missing House’ had nothing to do with the fate of Berlin Jews, it becomes possible to identify a fundamental construct in Boltanski’s practice as being a contrivance of contradictions that aims to smoke out a polemical assessment of memory. He is framing the state of ‘not knowing.’ He is describing speculation and his own feigned disinterest is warning us against it. Playing the role of agent-provocateur excludes him from action, and excuses him from actioning a formulated response to anything. So his mistrust is not passive. He is contriving counterviews, establishing inconsistencies and licensing subconscious dissent. And this is where his real strength lies. To say that there were good Nazi’s might seem counter-intuitive. But Boltanski tells us that it is actually counter-intuitive to suggest that there cannot have been good Nazi’s, or at least those who retained elements of goodness within them. This is Boltanski forcing us to confront the authentic human condition.
The unreliability of memory is the thread that binds Boltanski's work. This allows him the ultimate privilege of contradiction and inaccuracy as these represent defining qualities of memory. It is in the blurred vagaries between actuality and reconstruction, truth and fiction that his excavations take place. Rebecca Carns describes a, "fissure" between experience and remembrance and suggests that "Rather than lamenting it or ignoring it, this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity."

Boltanski coyly courts publicity and gives regular lengthy interviews. He often offers duplicitous answers that he frames in listless factual probity. Soloman-Godeau details how," critics have had little alternative but to fall back upon the notion of contradiction and with more or less elaboration, consider that as a distinguishing if not defining principle of his production."

They are correct in doing so. If core to Boltanski's work is the unreliability of memory, he could not then provide the critic, scholar or viewer a reliable commentary because his approach is directly attributable to his biographical circumstances. If he were to offer opinions or accurate personal detail, his exploitation of the interpretive qualities of memory would be lost. In this sense his contradictory and at times belligerent statements can be viewed as an attempt to retain a controlling interest. This does not diminish the inherent dangers of misinterpretation, and it is with this danger that Boltanski flirts. It also means that the critical focus on his work is largely corralled around the workings of memory. This distraction releases him from much negative criticism that could focus on his cannibalisation of previous works or the safe evocation aesthetic that has become his trade mark. Indeed any museum or gallery that suggests to its benefactors an invitation for him to exhibit knows pretty much what they are going to get. It is going to be beautiful, evocative, and melancholic and it is not going to bring to the
institution any adverse controversy. The flickering poignancy of his pseudo-iconic presentations allows all those who have mourned, or are old enough to realise that they will one day mourn, the pensiveness of the endless vista. The museum can always be assured of a satisfying level of hushed introspection and can rely on gaining intellectual legitimacy from what Rebecca Cains calls the "obsession with memory." She notes that, "the study of memory is one of the most fashionable branches of scholarly inquiry in a wide variety of disciplines."^36

False Memory Syndrome and debates over the reliability of childhood memories have reached the mainstream, being regularly explored in novels and dramas. Jay Winter claims that memory has become, 'a vague catch-all metaphor, a fashionably unfathomable composition that allows maximum licence.'^37 But Boltanski is less prosaic. His contradictory constructs exploit memories that Rebecca Cains suggests are, "simultaneously irretrievable, unstable, fluid, transient, poignant, melancholic and goldenly nostalgic."^38 Nevertheless, his denunciation of any significant personal biography as unimportant while at the same time releasing small snippets of antithetical information, not only reinforces his contradictory imperative, but distinguishes the distortions that personal memory perceptions have on received knowledge. James E. Young draws a distinction between what he terms, "common memory" and "deep memory" of the holocaust.^39 Common memory which, "tends to restore or establish coherence, closure and possibly a redemptive stance," and deep memory which Young describes as, "that which remains essentially inarticulable and unrepresentable, that which continues to exist as unresolved trauma just beyond the reach of memory." Saul Friedlander claims that 'deep memory' and 'common memory' do not lessen when conjoined and that, 'any accurate overview of events is always failed by the re-emergence of suppressed deep memory.'^40 The
undependable 'deep memories' with which Boltanski toys, have a direct effect on our ability to find shared recollection. Since this recollection is used in part as a documentary device in the chronicling and assessment of events, it is this failure to find collective cognizance that Boltanski mirrors in designing ambiguous constructs. Boltanski is not trying to change the world as would an activist artist, rather he is concerned with the impossibility of trying to understand it.

As well as appropriating the ephemeral, iconic assemblages of home-made shrines, his repeat placement of multiples such as light bulbs and tin boxes, creates a rhythm similar to the pulsing of Brancusi’s ‘Endless Column’ of 1937. The life journey that Brancusi evokes through the special dynamics in his ensemble at Tirgu Jiu is mirrored in the manipulations Boltanski imposes on the viewer. That both artists choose to memorialise without specific recollection, highlights the metaphysical and rhetorical similarities in their approaches. Just as Brancusi side stepped the first wave of activist art in the 1930’s, Boltanski dislocated himself from the new wave. This was not a cynical career move on his part but a natural biographical solution. Just as emphatic contradictions do not lend themselves to absolutes, he does manage to retain a level of creative integrity due to the fact that he is not evangelically non-conformist. His art is deeply conservative, not just because it is disengaged, but because it offers succour without any attempt at betterment.

Despite the problems that surround Boltanski’s practice, the most repetitive of which is what Marianne Hirsch describes as the “too radical a disconnection from their source and thus the possibility of further manipulation and appropriation,” his
contribution to an art which has the potential to effect positive and enduring change is twofold.

Firstly, he has refined and expanded the notion of spectacle in order to draw in the viewer, having made seduction an effective engagement device. Although his work is often beautiful, it does not become aesthetisized because its mournful, pensive and melancholic allure is a necessary part of his premise.

Secondly, and most significantly, in putting forward the case that individual memory is untrustworthy and that photographic and filmic records are no better, his request that we reject history creates the circumstances for a denial of specificity and an embrace of the authentic state of being, which is one of various shades of grey, of inconsistencies and of disorientation.
CHAPTER 1 NOTES


7. Ibid


23. Ibid


25. Ibid


27. Ibid
28. Ibid


37. Ibid


Chapter 2 - ‘There’s some kind of meaning behind it although I don’t know what.’

The problems in Boltanski’s practice and the difficulties inherent in his thesis are brought into stark focus when one examines its similarities with the work of Doris Salcedo. Salcedo, a Columbian national 14 years Boltanski’s junior, shares with him not only a similar visual aesthetic and working methodology, but also his overarching preoccupation with the function and application of memory. Although Salcedo’s work references the endemic violence and subsequent personal loss that blights her own country, she frequently cites the Holocaust not only in her recurrent allusions to the poetry of Paul Celan within both her titles and accompanying texts, but also through the three-dimensional language that she constructs, sharing with Boltanski what Nancy Princenthal describes as ‘the aesthetics of disappearance in the threshold conditions of perceptibility.’\(^1\) Like Boltanski’s, her work, is often beautiful and seductive, and so like Boltanski’s it is also vulnerable to aestheticization. Unlike Boltanski however, Salcedo demonstrates a faith in the ‘master narratives of historical memory.’\(^2\) And she actively seeks ways to deploy the urgent confidence that she has in what she views as the redemptive power of remembrance, precisely for the betterment of a society that she regards as needing the instructive poetry of art to ‘regain the humanity that has been desecrated.’\(^3\) In this she couldn’t be further away from the dissolute, hollowness of Boltanski’s counterfeit activism. And although her 2002 Installation ‘Noviembre 6 y 7,’ (fig 1.2) which I will examine later in this chapter, is her only piece to date which succeeds thoroughly as an activist work, all of her practice has at its core a politically responsive genesis, albeit with a problematically limited constituency. As she states, “I do not believe in artistic freedom. I do what I have to do or what I can possibly do.”\(^4\)
But an examination of her work is not only a useful vehicle in a general assessment of problems surrounding activist art simply because she is linked so closely to the sheep in wolf's clothing that is Boltanski, but because her practice epitomizes a specific 'type' of art that is by the very nature of its intent, worthy, and one which dominates contemporary art sites across the globe. It is a 'type' of art which, through its humanism and anthroposophy as well as its adherence to Joseph Beuys' concept of 'social sculpture,' whereby society itself is an art site, a place where art becomes, "the only evolutionary-revolutionary power," can have its social mission castrated by its own beauty and spectacle. Ironically, both of these elements, as I will discuss later in this thesis, can, if they are managed carefully, be invaluable ways in which to initially engage the viewer. But as with so much of this type of work, the complexity of the ingredients creates barriers that are antithetical to the activation of social change. Our invitation to wallow in melancholic intoxication so disfigures the work's intent, that it becomes contextually trapped in its own engagement devices. Salcedo's work can also be incorrectly lumped in with an even more pervasive, less principled type of work which I will examine in chapter 4. This is a superficial genre which borrows the 'look' of an art which is strident, ideological and/or issue based, but which offers nothing new or insightful.

Between 1991 and 1996 Salcedo made a series of Installations which she called 'Atrabiliarios' (Defiant)(fig 2.2). She travelled throughout Colombia interviewing survivors of the violence as well as those mourning family and friends who had 'disappeared.' Salcedo's aim for this series was to describe the aftermath of the events that she was having described to her. As Princenthal states, "The most important signifying function of Atrabiliarios, then, is the representation of an
In 'Atrabiliarios,' Salcedo made boxes that are both fitted into the gallery walls as well as freestanding on the floor. The floor pieces are made from sheets of thin animal skins, stitched crudely together and stacked on top of each other. The wall boxes contain shoes which Salcedo collected from both real and imagined victims, which are viewed through screens made of animal fibre. These works have a lugubrious clarity of intent, there is no mistaking the contemplative sphere of mournful reflection to which Salcedo is directing us, not just emotionally, but also geographically. Indeed the levels of violence in Colombia in the 1990's outstripped the grotesque statistics for many conventional conflicts. It was reported in the New York Times in 1998 that 10 Colombians a day were dying of politically motivated violence, and that another 60 people were killed each day from unclassified acts. And what became an almost unique aspect of Colombian political violence was the way victims were 'disappeared,' their bodies rarely to be recovered. In explaining her use of shoes, Salcedo states, "Atrabiliarios was based upon experiences of people who went missing. When a beloved person disappears everything becomes impregnated with that persons presence." And yet Salcedo uses the visual vernacular of the holocaust, her use of shoes being so redolent of the piles of shoes found in Auchwitz at its liberation and now famously displayed in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. Her use of skin suggests what we think we know of other Nazi aberrations, like the turning of human flesh into lampshades and the tattoo gloves of Ilse Koch, 'The Bitch of Buchenwald.' But even if we remove these obvious mis-associations, which act only to lessen the impact of her very specific 'Colombian' intent, and which make the work, if not actually 'of' the holocaust, then at least generic in its gaze, there is still the disturbing realisation that much of this work is made of real skin, albeit animal. And so the fact that 'real' death has been
caused in the manufacture of this art, makes any notion that empathy can be drawn out from the viewer through Salcedo’s ‘reframing of absence,’ an unlikely expectation either due to a conscious revulsion or a subconscious recognition and subsequent dislocation.

Salcedo’s use of a visual language that so disassociates her intent from her delivery, is not due to any lack of contemporary tradition or ‘scene’ within Colombia. Indeed Colombian contemporary art was celebrated in ‘Colombiage, 2008,’ an exhibition which showcased the work of 15 Colombian artists at the Riverside Studios in London. Amongst them was a video piece by Oscar Muñoz called ‘Project for a Memorial’ (2005), in which he copied newspaper photographs of the ‘disappeared’ by painting with water directly on to the pavement (fig 3.2). His film captures the portraits quickly disappearing as the slabs dry out. Maya Jaggi, writing in the Guardian suggested that, “His frantic repetition evokes death, disappearance and the duty of memory in a loosing battle with oblivion.” Like Salcedo’s ‘Atrabiliarios,’ Munoz’s piece on its own, was non-specific, even though the specific portraits he copied were authentic. But with the context of what was understood and publicised about ‘Colombiage,’ to support it, the content is clear and articulate. It is also a more precise response to the peculiar circumstances within Colombia than Salcedo’s ‘Atrabiliarios’ series. The economy of its fabrication, newspaper, water, sun and a camera, (a cheap mobile phone would suffice) is more befitting of a country that has the largest displaced population after Somalia.
The art landscape in Colombia is such that in 2003 in Bogotá, The Alcuarado Gallery was co-founded by Juan Gallo Restrepo whose aim, as well as to make the Alcuardo turn a profit without charging admittance fees, which he has managed to do, was to organise site-specific exhibitions in derelict urban areas across Colombia, an aim in which he has also succeeded. But it is not simply impecuniousness that might help distinguish the specific personality of the Colombian affliction. Nadin Ospin’s ‘Ecstatic Critic,’ (1993) and his ‘Idol with Doll,’ (2000), were included in ‘Colombiagē.’ Both sculptures amalgamate Pre-Colombian artefacts with popular contemporary Disney characters, Mickey Mouse being a recurring image in his three dimensional work. Encouraged by the prodigious number of fake Pre-Colombian statues being offered for sale as ‘the real thing,’ Ospin muses on the concept of a purity of primitive Latin American culture and the dominance of seemingly trivial cultural impositions from the north. While the use of Mickey Mouse is not innovative within contemporary practice, it has become a short hand for cultural imperialism both inconsequential, and grave. John Keane was criticised for being frivolous when after having been commissioned by the Imperial War Museum in 1990 to be the official War Artist in the first Gulf War, he produced an image, ‘Mickey Mouse At the Front,’ (1991), which was quickly miss-interpreted by The Evening Standard as Mickey Mouse sitting on the toilet amongst a pile of debris. And this is in stark contrast to the reception Michael Sandle’s sculpture, ‘Twentieth Century Memorial’ 1971-8, received, which is a bronze of Mickey Mouse firing a machine gun. This was widely celebrated as a bold critique of foreign policy and of the reckless and unprincipled pursuit of power at any cost. And so Ospin’s appropriation should be seen as a traditional critical construct, where the legitimate focus for varying forms of venom, is precisely the global nature of the interference. Even wealthy countries such as the U K are not
immune from the all-pervasive trickle-down of North American political inducements, disguised as inconsequential cultural renovations. Jake and Dinos Chapman's, 'The Chapman Family collection' 2002, their array of faux-ethnographic carvings assimilated with McDonalds detritus, might well be 'art about art', pointing us to the proposition that modernism is constructed on the back of fundamentally incorrect understandings of so called 'primitive' cultures. But the carvings that the Chapmans ape, have become Western by proxy, making up a staple of our viewing expectations in most provincial museums, as well as in endless textbooks exploring the history of modern art. So Ospín's and the Chapman's use of modern North American iconography is based on their firsthand experience. And while neither Ospín nor the Chapman brothers could be described as being primarily politically inspired artists, their sharing of the iconography of dissent signifies a more intimate and transferable connectivity that not only closes the gap between a contemporary Columbian tradition and a Western European Avant-Garde, but which confirms a slippage whereby the imagery and narrative of protest becomes less formal and less exclusive.

A legitimate argument for not finding against Salcedo's holocaust appropriation would be that the holocaust belongs to everyone, a crime so huge that it changes how we must view the whole of humanity. But the fact that she is attempting to highlight the deviancies within her own community renders her image appropriation highly questionable. But 'Atrabiliarios' is not fundamentally 'about' the holocaust. It pivots on her discovery that the female victims who were specific to her own country's horrors, were often held in captivity for extended periods before their eventual execution and subsequent 'disappearance.' And like Boltanski's 'Lake of
the Dead,' which is visually too close to documented evidential scenes to make it anything other than a sensationalist borrowing, 'Atrabiliarios,' seen critically in the context of holocaust imagery, which by default it is, becomes unnecessary and trite. It is too close to what exists, in the real world, not the art world. It is as if the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum was to take a selection of artefacts on a tour of major international art galleries. In mimicking the residue of extraordinary events, in an art gallery, a space where people have come to expect to see extraordinary things, genocide becomes ordinarily extraordinary. In discussing why she would not wish to visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau site, Griselda Pollock describes, "the utter perversity of arriving at Auschwitz by cab, as if the place belonged in the realm of ordinary travel, of arrival and departure." "

A number of Salcedo's earlier 'untitled' (fig 4.2) works from the late 1980's in which she reconfigures discarded hospital beds and trolleys are too redolent of Tuol Sleng, the former high school in Phnom Penh which is now Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (fig 5.2). The Khmer Rouge turned the school into 'Security Prison 21 (s-21),' building tiny cells too small to sit down in, and turned former class rooms into a labyrinth of torture suites. In 1979 the prison was discovered by the victorious Vietnamese army. Unlike the S.S. at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Khmer Rouge did not have time to hide their atrocities such was the speed of the Vietnamese advance. So when a young Vietnamese officer came across the Tuol Sleng site he immediately recognised the significance of what he had found and ordered that nothing should be disturbed, which is largely the way it remains today. Visitors have to step over mobile electric generators used for electrocuting their victims and pass by thirty year old pools of blood under rusting bed frames. Like the Nazis the Khmer Rouge were
fastidious record keepers and they photographed every prisoner who passed through the prison before they passed on to the Choeung Ek extermination centre.

On the walls of the museum, like a less well manicured Boltanski, the curators of the Museum have assembled hundreds of these photographic portraits, many of which have faint smiles playing across their lips. All of them have their shoulders back due to the ropes that bind their hands behind their backs, out of view.

Because these places exist, works like Salcedo’s ‘Untitled’ 1980’s series, and the ‘Atrabiliarios,’ series must only be regarded as theatre, the sculptural equivalent of the slasher movie, where nothing ever depicted is ever as bad as reality but where a part of the entertainment value is not only in wondering what it would be like to be either the victim or the perpetrator, but in wondering why the experience is so enjoyable.

Salcedo has stated that she is exploring, “a type of knowledge that is greater than oneself; is so broad spatially, and in terms of its volume and comprehensiveness, that one cannot even grasp its meaning.” She continued that “whenever art enters this field of the ‘uncanny,’ or what is beyond the human sphere, it arouses my interest.”

And so we see Salcedo grappling with the most fundamental metaphysical issues that have exercised human thought ever since being born, procreating and dying came to be recognised as, ‘uncanny.’ This makes her a very traditional artist. That the cycle is cut short by violence does not change the peculiarity of the state of no longer being. And loss is the same whether it has been created artificially or it has occurred naturally. There may be added facets in addition to the loss, like anger,
incredulity, fear. But the very fact that a space has been created is what Salcedo is concerned with, far more than the fact that in Colombia, her home, the vacuum is so often created prematurely. In her interview with Carlos Basualdo she comments, “As Maurice Blanchot has said, one cannot experience death.”\textsuperscript{12} Our inability to experience death is one of the few universal truths. It is not a unique state, and it cannot be experienced in any exceptional geographical location, nor through any exceptional event. But the manner in which loss burglarises Colombian households through ‘disappearances,’ is a unique motif of Central and South American conflicts.

In the epic slaughters of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century there was at least an understanding of what to be unaccounted for really meant. In the First World War there was sufficient anecdotal knowledge gleaned from soldiers on leave that ‘Missing in Action’ meant that unless there had been notification from the German authorities that a loved one was being held as a prisoner of war, there was a certainty that one or more shell bursts had made identification of the body impossible. In the Battles for Moscow and Stalingrad there was a level of certainty amongst the families of the missing that if they had not been killed in combat, then they had either died in captivity, been executed by Soviet authorities as a spy if they had escaped, or been killed by Commissars while attempting a retreat. And there was little expectation by those whose families where transported to the Nazi concentration camps that they would ever see them again. Uncertainty is not just a practical feature of the dirty conflicts in Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, it is a specific tool, a weapon in an arsenal of depravity which extends beyond death to corrode the living. Susan Meiselas’ 1978 photograph, ‘Cuesta del Plomo’ (fig 6.2) illustrates this convincingly. In the foreground of a serene Nicaraguan landscape lies a pair of jeans
with a spinal cord protruding from the waist band. In the struggle between the
Somoza dictatorship and the Sandinista opposition it was necessary for the
‘disappeared’ to be made anonymous in such a way since the Argentinean method
of disposing of both the living and the dead several miles out to sea, was a resource
unavailable to them. But Salcedo makes no reference to this regional penchant in
her work. Stella Baraklianou identifies what the anthropologist Michael Taussig
describes as the “labour of the negative”\(^\text{13}\) whereby the most essential knowledge to
possess is the knowledge of “what not to know.”\(^\text{14}\) A secret so widely known that it
becomes a public secret, where the act of revealing it is a fatal misdemeanour. To
discuss the fear of ‘disappearances’ becomes a self fulfilling prophecy. To
inexplicably no longer reside in one’s natural domestic setting is the motif that defines
the Colombian horror. And although Salcedo is continually referred to as ‘a
Colombian artist’ as if this were to denote an inevitability of political infusion, with the
exception of ‘Noviembre 6 y 7’ there is nothing Colombian in her practice

The ‘Atragantiarios’ series is the work by Salcedo that to date is the most closely linked
to Boltanski. This is not simply because it looks like his work, but because it is the
most duplicitous. It contributes less to our understanding of the world, and goes no
way toward improving it. But it uses the veneer of an art which does both. And it is
this which makes it so ungracious, and even callous. Even the title offers little as a
route into it. Derived from the Latin word for a kind of melancholy that is most
associated with loss and mourning, ‘atra bilis,’ from ‘atratus,’ dressed in black, and
‘bilis,’ rage or bile. It is not a phrase often used today in modern Spanish and so this
series might just as well have been entitled, ‘Untitled,’ like so many of her other
works. The title is not only an unwise affectation, it is also a barrier, a ‘Shibboleth.’
Between 1995 and 1998 Salcedo made a series of three sculptures, ‘Unland the orphan’s tunic,’ (1997) (fig 7.2). ‘Unland audible in the mouth,’ (1998), and ‘Unland irreversible witness’ (1995-98) (fig 8.2). The word ‘Unland’ alludes to a poem by Paul Celan which itself echoes the German word ‘unheimlich’ which was the title of an essay by Sigmund Freud which translates as ‘The Uncanny.’ Of the three works, ‘Unland the orphan’s tunic’ best represents these works as a series. It is two halves of two ordinary kitchen tables, one slightly larger than the other which is slotted over the smaller to make a whole, but with a step up in the middle where the heights have not matched. The taller half is coved in a rough grey silk which spreads a few inches onto the lower half. Where the silk ends and the wooden surface of the lower half begins, Salcedo has drilled hundreds of minute holes through the table through which she has threaded individual strands of human hair creating a black sash that acts as a visual border between the two original tables.

Salcedo’s use of furniture is in itself a distinctive motif in her work, standing for the absence of human presence, indicating a simple domestic setting that has been physically dismantled by the removal and disappearance of the thing that gave these utilitarian objects their meaning. In other works, furniture such as chairs, headboards and other more intimate objects stand in place of the body, a direct anthropomorphic substitution. And so it is not then difficult to read the table, with its weight of banal contextual ambience as a symbol of family, of ordinariness and of shared experience. The sash of black hair is what Andreas Huyssen describes as a “trace of a human body, of the victim of violence through the table’s surface, is like the threading of pain and its memories through the surface of history.” This simple reading of the work, while not being specifically Colombian in any way, and the use
of human hair having explicit overtones of the collected waste in Auschwitz-Berkenau, could present a more articulate, and ironically, given the huge amount of labour involved, a much less self-conscious and honed down piece than any of the 'Atrabiliarios' series. And with less contextual distractions this work could have made a contribution, if we understand that to activate remembrance is to activate the potential for change through an understanding of the past. But in discussing Salcedo’s use of human hair, Gill Bennett refers to what she calls the “trace”\textsuperscript{16} in Salcedo’s work, and claims that it “always short-circuits the interpretive endeavour, offering too little content to ground a narrative of absent characters.” As with so much of Salcedo’s output, there is an objective deficit, which is not the same as the contrivance of enigmatic contradictions with which Boltanski surrounds himself, but a failure to step beyond the beautiful. Far from the staged horror of the ‘Atrabiliarios’, series, the ‘Unland’ series, and in particular ‘the orphan’s tunic’ are sublime in their delivery and fascinating in their dexterity, an example of the ‘spectacle’ which I will discuss later in this thesis. But it is not only the beauty, and the ‘trace’ that corrupts the moment, but also the title. Like ‘Atrabiliarios,’ the title ‘Unland’ is largely unfathomable, what Tanya Barson describes as “a made up word invented by Salcedo.”\textsuperscript{17} Barston claims that it refers to “the condition of dispossession and displacement that occurs during war,” and maintains that it “draws attention to the idea that no one can really be said to own the land they inhabit.” The vast majority of the audience, those who are not versed in the more obscure poetry of Paul Celan, or the Freudian concept of Das Unheimlich, “un-home-ly,” where something can feel familiar and yet also foreign resulting in a sensation of strange discomfiture, will disengage from this work. They will know that they are not wanted. The impenetrable title will stop them spending analytical time in the way that a title like, ‘untitled’ would.
That said, 'Untitled' is an invitation, whereas 'Atrabiliarios,' and 'Unland' are barriers, wreckers to engagement, and so antithetical to activism. And while the rough silk covering one half of the table in 'Unland the orphan's tunic,' might direct the viewer toward a tunic, it will not divulge the owner's status as an orphan. In fact this piece is a narrative response to the plight of a 6 year old girl that Salcedo met in an orphanage. Having witnessed the murder of her mother, she refused to wear anything other than the dress her mother had made for her and which she was wearing on the day of the killing. This account is nowhere present in the fog of visual uncertainty, an uncertainty that is manifest in those who write about her work.

Huyssen notes that "Salcedo leaves no doubt as to the identity of this Unland which serves as her melancholy inspiration. It is her homeland, Colombia." 18 In fact this could not be further from the truth. There is nothing unequivocally Colombian about having your mother murdered in front of you. But even the simple tale, which Salcedo had been gifted by the victim, failed to be told. What 'Unland the orphans tunic' is, is a very beautiful object, emotionally loaded in the sense that we are all going to have to leave the kitchen table one day, and a missed opportunity. Had she wished to highlight the ongoing violence in her country, the title could have told the tale, and the sculpture elucidated it. The complex circumlocutory title stops this sculpture working in the way it could. If it was not meant to generate outrage and activate at the very least some form of debate, the anecdote would not appear in any of the accompanying texts. Her assertion, "I do not illustrate testimonies," 19 begs the question as to why all three of the 'Unland' pieces were based on specific incidents of violence in Colombia.

Her get out clause is even more absurd when she says that she does not, "try to control the experience of the viewer. I simply reveal-expose an image." 20 If this were
the case, Salcedo would join Boltanski as representing the antithesis of activist art. But Salcedo does have a moral agenda. What we actually see in a broader survey is a slow evolution in Salcedo's work. And so when Huyssen describes her work in relation to the 'Unland' series as being “aesthetically complex without being aestheticizing, and subtly political without resorting to a direct message.” It should be read as Huyssen being aspirational on her behalf rather than simply over-generous.

In 2007 Salcedo was invited to take her turn in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. This invitation could be seen as the pinnacle in any artist's career, the Turbine Hall having had its pedigree bestowed upon it by the likes of Louise Bourgeois,'Maman,'(2000), Anish Kapoor's 'Marsyas'(2002), and Bruce Nauman's 'Raw Materials,'(2004). Salcedo's response was 'Shibboleth,'(fig 9.2) which was the 167 metre long crack in the floor which is intended to represent exclusion, segregation and the kind of arbitrary borders that socially and culturally disconnect the third world from the first. 'Shibboleth' is also a formal and quite traditional response to space, radically changing the viewer's focus and distorting and re-writing physical insecurities. In exploring architectural principles, Salcedo claims to question the values on which modernity is constructed, stating that, "The history of racism runs parallel to the history of modernity." And this is a worthy aim, indeed the crack does physically mark the separation between South London on one side of Tate Modern, that traditionally housed poor immigrant communities, and the other side which looks across the Thames to the city of London and to the extraordinary wealth therein. And this is how 'Shibboleth' is to work, a simple demarcation that should, and could create a period of reflection in the viewer and perhaps an acknowledgement that the
gap that is getting wider should be held in abeyance at least while a mutually acceptable method of reverse is designed, one which would suspend the need for physical conflict. However, ‘Shibboleth’ does exactly the opposite.

Since it was opened in 2000, the Tate Modern and the Turbine Hall in particular has been an intrinsic part of the London tourist trail. A place known and understood beyond the art world not only due to its conversion from a famous landmark power station into another ‘must visit’ location on the visitor map, but because of the publicity generated by works like Carsten Holler’s 2007 installation ‘Test Site,’ where he turned the space into a giant playground with huge curving steel slides down which the public were encouraged to fall. (fig 10.2) By its peculiarity and its reputation for what might frequently seem bizarre and eccentric manifestations of an art world that is regularly derided as the tailor of the Emperor’s new clothes, the Turbine Hall attracts a broad constituency of people who often have had very little experience of contemporary visual arts and who are ripe for exploitation. (In Olafur Eliasson’s 2003 installation ‘The Weather Project,’ he turned the Turbine Hall into a solarium. The project had over 2 million visitors over a period of 5 months) (fig 11.2) So by giving it an unfathomable title, Salcedo excludes this majority from a greater understanding of her installation, and contradicts the didactic intent of her efforts. Once again the title becomes a saboteur.

‘Shibboleth’ is an ancient Hebrew word that describes a language or custom that acts as a sign of belonging to a specific group or class. It comes from the Old Testament, the book of Judges. After defeating the Ephraimites in battle, the
Gileadites tested the identities of the survivors who were attempting to cross the river Jordan, by getting them to say the word 'Shibboleth.' It was understood that they were unable to make the 'sh' sound. 42,000 were discovered in this way, and executed. Salcedo uses the word as a clear metaphor and one which, were it to be understood, has connotations not only within a global socio-political critique, but also amongst a more prosaic and localised class and caste system. But 'Shibboleth' is inherently a work for the chattering classes, those who while not necessarily armed with a broad knowledge of Salcedo's back catalogue, do understand that there is a method of comprehension that can allow them to apprehend meaning and message beyond mere spectacle. And it is those who will stay with it, give it evaluative time, although those with sufficient knowledge of the Old Testament to be able to grasp the title's connections will be a small minority within this already limited section of the audience.

Writing in the New York Times, Sarah Lyall quotes a visitor to the Turbine Hall, a Peter Lord, as saying, "there's some kind of meaning behind it, although I don't know what." Lyall's article is unusual in that not only does it include negative comment such as Mr Lord's, but also because it is not simply an elaboration of Tate Modern's press statement that 'Salcedo is addressing a long legacy of racism and colonialism that underlies the modern world.' However the article is typical of the coverage that 'Shibboleth' received in as much that it focuses, albeit humorously, on the potential safety considerations of Salcedo's installation in a similar way that many commentators have been exercised by the mystery of the crack's construction. Analysis of the work's failure to connect has been almost entirely by-passed, save for Andrew Mead's article in The Architects' Journal where he writes, "But unless
prompted by the handout that explains Salcedo's intentions, would you ever conclude that 'this negative space represents the area occupied by those that have been left out of the history of modernity'? I doubt it."^24 Mead is quoting from Salcedo's proposal for the Turbine Hall installation where she writes with no sense of irony, that she is attempting to address those who have been "kept at the margin of high western culture."^25 And the value of 'Shibboleth's undoubted spectacle is lost when it could have been utilised. Instead of reeling the viewer in by the pure visual phenomenon of a 167 metre long fissure across the floor of a cavernous art space, and then once netted, directing them toward the mission; the viewer is abandoned, unable themselves to make the 'sh' sound. Alternatively 'Shibboleth,' which is intended to address what Salcedo describes as "the (W)hole, "in history" that marks the bottomless difference that separates whites from non-white,"^26 actually creates its own language that acts as a test of belonging. And those who do belong are able to translate its ambiguity into a series of interpretive possibilities that become more and more weighty the further behind they leave those still trying to enunciate 'sh.' While Paul Gilroy's 'belonging' status allows him further ambition for the fissure. "The crack gets wider, and will go on getting wider. It opens our world on to another axis, and in our principled response to that re orientation lies the healing possibility of mourning and reconciliation. In that belated gesture, a deeper security than the variety proffered by military planners is waiting to be embraced."^27 Gilroy has so perfected his 'sh,' that he is able to run with 'Shibboleth' to places for which it was never intended. And there is also no irony when Gilroy suggests that 'Shibboleth' "returns us to a painful sense of our world's damaged character. That discomfort is connected to the agency of culture in securing division and hierarchy."^28 Which is in fact exactly what 'Shibboleth is guilty of. And Gilroy is not the only one bestowing
upon 'Shibboleth' meaning well beyond its orbit. Writing in the *Evening Standard*, Ben Lewis concludes that 'Shibboleth' "will be remembered alongside Damien Hirst's 'Diamond skull,' 2007, as one of the most important works of art of the first decade of the 21st century." Lewis is not taken by its socio historical comment, claiming that it is "another faked natural phenomenon," referring to Olafur Eliasson's 'The Weather Project.' But even more extravagantly, for Lewis, 'Shibboleth' represents a collapse of the art market, to a 37% drop in Sotheby's share price. And so it is not unreasonable that 'Shibboleth' could, or even should, be all things to all men by the nature of its interpretive hospitality, which in turn allows for a personalised infusion of meaning, at least for those who 'belong.' But the pure physical majesty of this piece bestows upon it a nobility of cause that does not even exist in Salcedo's evangelising. And it is this majesty which Mieke Bal describes as harbouring "everything that is not stipulated in its positive counterpart. Hence in the empty hall, the unscripted negative space opens up an abyss of unlimited meaning." The Turbine Hall works to frame enormity, to package and present an approximation of infinity in the same way that a cathedral can ignite reverie and metaphysical contemplation in the non believer.

It is not surprising, given the scale and intent of 'Shibboleth' that Salcedo should be mistakenly credited with what Mieke Bal describes as having "recaptured the memorising function of monumentality." While Andreas Huyssen claims that "Salcedo knows how public monuments and memorials are bound to serve as ciphers of forgetting through aestheticization or direct political comment." Bal uses the example of French war memorials, "everywhere, down to the smallest villages, there is a 'monument aux Mort,' mostly a conventional memorial to the unknown
soldiers who died for the glory of the fatherland. One wonders if their omnipresence as well as their traditional aesthetics, render such monuments invisible. Bal misunderstands how the ‘Monuments aux Mort’ work. In fact they are ‘known’ soldiers, whether or not their bodies were recovered. And in this respect they are simply grave markers. France being a relatively static society in terms of regional mobility, these monuments continue to be visited individually and not just collectively on commemoration dates. But most importantly, the impact of these memorials rely on scale in the same way that Peter Eisenman’s 2005 ‘Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe’ (fig 12.2) does through repetition. When one enters a small French village or town, one makes a fleeting non-arithmetical assessment of its size in correspondence to the number of names on its memorial. The generational decimation and subsequent social and economic degradation presents itself in layers of recognition in ways that Salcedo’s ‘Unland’ series fails to do. But for Bal, “Monuments relate to memory and to scale, and Salcedo addresses both aspects over and over again.” In reality the ‘Monuments aux Mort’ do exactly this, and it is Salcedo who entirely neglects to address these aspects, with one notable exception, her 2002 installation ‘Noviembre 6 y 7,’

Eisenman’s ‘Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe’ demonstrates how a traditional form of permanent memorial can be both specific and broadly inclusive, while at the same time having a physicality that both creates and absorbs layers of meaning. It consists of 2,751 smooth rectangular concrete blocks of varying sizes set across a 19,000 square metre plot of land between the Brandenburg gate and Potsdamer Platz. Approached from the Brandenburg end, the blocks start off shallow, ankle high, with saplings planted amongst them. The viewer is drawn in
slowly, reminiscent of accounts by allied soldiers of their incremental comprehension on coming across silent camps in unremarkable Eastern forests. The area used to be known before reunification as the G.D.R. death strip, it had been part of the no-mans' land separating East from West. Prior to that the site had been the home of Joseph Goebbels' ministry of propaganda. In a re-unified Berlin, the Memorial takes up a prime piece of real estate which as well as being a symbol not only of the importance the work has been afforded by the authorities, also means that it will be at the heart of the regenerated city. But early criticism of the project was less about its specific placement and more about its lack of overtly Jewish symbolism. It was felt that it would feel like too artificial a gesture being surrounded as it is by so many literal architectural and archaeological remnants from the war. But the loudest and most difficult criticism to defend it from, is that it should honour all victims of the Third Reich and not only the Jewish victims. A lesser concern was that it was to be too abstract. The fact that in the early days of the project Eisenman had Richard Serra on board meant that it was always going to conform to a minimalist aesthetic. And this is evident not only stylistically through the use of industrial materials and neutral surfaces, but in the huge repetitive grid of blocks that form a pattern gallery that becomes so much greater than the sum of its parts. The illusion of rhythmic certainty forces us to relinquish thoughts of particularity. Tribe or creed become insignificant as the gestalt purges all metaphor and leaves only the inevitable tragedy of our end. The vast scale forces on us abnormal, unfathomable yet anonymous loss. Eisenman would have been aware that the title of his work could never have limited its reach. The false perimeter that is implied by it being dedicated to 'the murdered Jews of Europe' is breached by both its essential psychological mechanism and by its location. It may be prime real estate, but 60 years on and this part of Berlin still
displays the evidence of its ruination. The swathe of no-mans land is still evident, and there are still many buildings that are yet to be demolished. Functioning pre-war buildings still display shrapnel and bullet marks. It is difficult to envisage how the city might evolve in the years to come, but it is clear that much of this architectural testimony has been left to act in memorial, in much the same way as ‘Security Prison 21 (s-21)’ in Phnom Penh was.

Contrary to the way in which Salcedo’s work often fails to reach their conceptual constituencies through either questionable and confusing visual appropriation and coagulated and baffling titles, Eisenman’s straightforwardly descriptive title manages to create an uncluttered contextual landscape where the viewer becomes licensed to extend the metaphor personally. And because all around this memorial there is incontrovertible evidence of the suffering of the German people, the context in which this piece functions is fluid and live and inclusive. The empathy engendered reaches beyond the Jewish community. But Eisenman’s memorial also works through time, and familiarity.

After 4 years the memorial has become part of the urban landscape of Berlin. The confluence of beauty and spectacle allied with gangrenous history acts as a multi faceted warning that allows this work to age with vitality, as well as with architectural and sculptural dignity. It is already hard to imagine Berlin without it. And in trying to do so it becomes difficult to imagine what set of circumstances would allow for its removal. Indeed what circumstances would ever allow for the demolition of the Auschwitz-Birkenau site, now only an afternoon’s drive from Berlin. And it is partly
the question of just how necessary the preservation of memory is, that becomes an indicator of success. Eisenman’s memorial could not have failed. Even if Berliners had hated its aesthetics, they would have come, if not to love it, to embrace it as a fellow Berliner, in the way that Londoners initially loathed the now grade 1 listed ‘Centre Point Tower.’ Eisenman’s piece is not too much of anything to make it a celebrity in its own right. It is not too innovative, too beautiful and it is not even too controversial. So it is not in danger, like Constantine Brancusi’s ensemble at Targu Jiu, in Romania, of overshadowing its specific function.

The place Brancusi’s ensemble holds in the history of modernism and its status as Brancusi’s magnum opus obliterates its roll as a tribute to the memory of the people of Targu jiu who died defending their town from a German onslaught in 1916. Never the less, both artists’ memorials share a practical physical function, in that they both have a mechanism that aids directly the inducement of contemplation. The Berlin authorities have encouraged a series of cafes and restaurants to be built at the Potsdamer end of Eisenman’s ‘memorial’ specifically to discourage people from picnicking on the slabs. This runs counter to Eisenman’s wishes, who would like the slabs to be places for viewers to sit in meditative reflection, just as Brancusi intended for his ensemble at Targu Jiu. Comprising of three elements, ‘The Table of Silence,’ ‘The Gate of the Kiss,’ and ‘The Endless Column,’ together they represent the passage of life. ‘The Table of Silence’(fig 13.3) marks the period of family inclusion, when a child is surrounded by love and instruction and mute comfort, the same table that Salcedo illustrates in her ‘Unland ‘series. Brancusi set out 12 limestone chairs which are too far from the table for it to be used practically, and the chairs are set too far apart for any exchange of conversation to be comfortably audible. Brancusi
facilitates introspection and like Eisenman’s piece, the metaphysical uncertainties it submits take the viewer beyond those individuals who died in 1916, adding an extra layer of inclusivity which in turn secures the memorial a longer life through a broader relevance. The only work by Salcedo that succeeds in working like this is ‘Noviembre 6 y 7,’ which like Brancusi’s ensemble, draws on a collective localised memory. Albeit a memory which Boltanski would mistrust.

‘Noviembre 6 y 7’ is a work that can be seen both as a memorial, and a critical re-examination of the events that surround the hijacking on November the 6th and 7th 1985 of the Supreme Court in Bogotá, Salcedo’s home city. Left wing guerrillas took 300 hostages in a siege that lasted for 53 hours. The guerrillas’ intension was to hold a trial of the President, Belisario Betancur. But the resultant efforts by the Colombian special forces to free the hostages caused the deaths of 11 Supreme Court judges, 74 civilians and all 35 of the guerrillas, as well as the destruction of the Supreme Court Building.

‘Noviembre 6 y 7’ was ‘performed’ on the 17th anniversary of the siege and was sited at the newly built Palace of Justice. Starting at 11.35am on the 6th of November 2002, from different points on its roof Salcedo lowered 280 wooden chairs down the façade of the new building over a 53 hour period. The exact number of chairs used had no symbolic significance, however they were lowered both singularly as well as in groups, and at different speeds to create what Salcedo described as an “image of loss and absence,” which “mark a space and a time to remember.”
There is a poetic clarity to this piece which when allied with its date and its location, meant that it did not suffer from the contextual ambiguities that corrupted the 'Atrabiliarios' and 'Unland' series. And unlike 'Shibboleth' whose overworked framework of connections and glutinous arcane language reduced it to an enigmatic soup, 'Noviembre 6 y 7' is simple and easily read and has worked practically to keep troubling, unanswered questions about the role and response of the security forces to the fore. So much so that on the 3rd of November 2005 the Supreme Court created a Truth Commission to investigate the events of 1985.

'Noviembre 6 y 7' is demonstrably a utilitarian, activist art work, as well as being a traditional memorial, albeit a temporary one. There is nothing exclusionary in the title and nothing cryptic in its delivery. Like Eisenman’s 'Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe,' its activism lies in its comprehensibility, in its activation of memory as a catylist and in its attempt to cement tolerance guarded by collective vigilance. And in Salcedo's case the activism lies in the significant contribution it made toward the bringing about of an investigation aimed at uncovering the truth. But 'Noviembre 6 y 7' could not have worked at any other site. It was exclusively site specific, and it is this exclusivity which creates a set of issues which change the way much of her work should be approached.

Salcedo's 'untitled' concrete furniture is a series that was made throughout the 1990's (fig 14.2). They are pieces of furniture that have been physically amalgamated and filled with concrete. For example, an office desk with its negative space filled and a chair emerging out of it. Or a tallboy with two smaller chests.
nuzzling into its smoothed concrete interior. Some pieces have a trace of clothing just discernable, but most hold simple, solid interiors. Like all her work, they are exquisitely crafted, but not to the point where the viewer is overtaken with reverie for the artist's skill at the expense of the contextual content. This series is exactly as Huyssen incorrectly attributed the 'Unland' series. They are "aesthetically complex without being aestheticizing, and subtly political without resorting to a direct message."^^ And despite 'Noviembre 6 y 7, being a successful piece of activist art, the 'earlier' untitled concrete series represents a moment in Salcedo's output where she is at her most confident and is less vulnerable to contextual distraction. A point were she is less seduced by the non-traditional potential of materials, and allows them to go their own way, a kind of interventionist 'truth to materials.' This concrete series should be viewed as a successful reworking of both the 'Atrabiliarios' and 'Unland' series. And so in spite of having made two unsuccessful series which both failed to offer sufficient contextual recognition to extend the possibility of change in the way Salcedo claims to have wished, they did result in a large, highly accomplished, albeit resolutely non activist, series. However, were these pieces to be shown in any of the urban sites that the Alcuado Gallery uses, the ongoing violence within Colombia would infuse them with meaning and create the potential for these pieces to negatively affect the situation, by igniting more violence. The pieces that use bedroom furniture which have articles of clothing still identifiable within the draws of dressing tables would speak to all sides in the conflict, as all sides have experienced 'disappearances,' which most commonly occur in the middle of the night.
While ‘Noviembre 6 y 7’ can only be site specific, the concrete series relies wholly on its own ‘non’ site specificity. In doing away with any overt attempt to make this work of or about either particular events or national circumstances, they become openly interpretive. In this respect the series is comparable to what ‘Shibboleth’ ‘could’ have been.

I saw Salcedo’s untitled concrete series in 1999 in Liverpool’s Anglican Cathedral, a space considerably larger than the Turbine Hall. This building compresses time. Its foundation stone was laid in 1904 but it was not completed until 1978. As a child I was taken to visit a place that was still under construction but which was already pock marked with shrapnel wounds from the Liverpool Blitz of 1941. During the bombing 4,000 people were killed and 6,500 homes were demolished. And so my commandeering of a false shared experience led me to view Salcedo’s concrete pieces within this space as evocations of the devastation of the city of Liverpool, of compacted masonry giving up its broken chattels, the anthropomorphism deliberating on a localised tragedy.

The remnants of the 6,5000 homes were taken by lorry to Crosby Beach and dumped at the edge of the sea. Much of the concrete debris has been subsumed into the sand dunes, but thousands of red bricks remain, rounded and smoothed by nearly 70 years of Irish tides. And this now forms the backdrop to Anthony Gormley’s ‘Another Place,’1997,(fig 15.2) which consists of 100 cast iron figures facing out to sea over a 2 mile stretch of coast. It had previously been installed at Cuxhaven in Germany, Stavanger in Norway and De Panne in Belgium. Like Salcedo’s concrete
furniture, their geography invokes specific connotations dependant on the context of the environment. But unlike Salcedo’s pieces, Gormley’s work is not, as Huyssen described ‘subtly political.’ ‘Another Place’ is an object of pure introspection. It works well in the context of Liverpool Bay because the city itself has been the transit point for so much emigration as well as immigration. But the diasporas that Liverpool has facilitated are a thing of the past in terms of the role a port can play, at least in the developed world. ‘Another Place’ reflects on that past whereas Eisenman’s memorial warns for the future and Salcedo’s concrete works evoke a past, a present and an inevitability.

Salcedo’s work is significant in analysing the possibilities of an activist art practice for three reasons. Firstly because it so nearly hits the spot, and would do if it were not for the repeated flaws that I have documented. But secondly, it exposes how easy it is for artists, like Boltanski, to use the visual language of activism as an aid to a melancholic seduction which skirts around the periphery of putting forward any kind of statement of intent, but which manipulates a far weightier psychological vocabulary. That is not to say that Boltanski’s thesis, that history is essentially untrustworthy, is not in itself an important contribution to knowledge, even if by its very nature this knowledge cannot be tested. But works like Eisenman’s ‘Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe’ and Salcedo’s ‘Noviembre 6 y 7’ do work activistically. But by working to halt repetition, effect is being had, however unquantifiable. But thirdly, and most importantly, her practice emphasises not only the need for a delicately nuanced approach to differing circumstances, which could rightly be said of most contemporary creative practices whether politically motivated or not. But it also highlights an issue that is central to activist art which is the relative ease in
which work can provoke, engage and activate at a local level, but fail to translate to a broader, perhaps even global audience. It would be too simple to suggest that Salcedo is a 'good' local artist but a 'poor' international one, although this is the case. It would be more accurate to say that her International work has had to carry the critical burden of having as a stable mate a local approach which has proved so functionally successful. Indeed if it were not for the existence on 'Noviembre 6 y 7,' Salcedo would represent just another cog in the melancholia machine, albeit one without Boltanski's defining History mission. But because of 'Noviembre 6 y 7,' Salcedo's broader practice is emblematic of the fundamental difficulties inherent in attempting to relocate a parochial utilitarian approach into an international 'art' arena. Instead, and with the knowledge of her ability to motivate provincially, she can be seen as producing something that flirts with both her natural Colombian constituency on the one hand, but which fails to offer either opinion or direction, and on the other, with the International art community and lay spectacle seekers who are left dazzled, superficially satisfied but none the wiser. When spectacle is employed by the melancholia machine, this is a state which has increasingly come to represent success.
CHAPTER 2 NOTES


17. Barson, T. 'Unland: The Place of Testimony,' Doris Salcedo, Tate Papers, Tate, (Spring) 2004 [accessed 18 August, 2009].


20. Ibid


33. Ibid, p.54.

34. Ibid, p.40.


Chapter 3 – Transgressive Hierarchies: Methods, Distractions and Engagements

As both a memorial, and a critical re-examination of events, Salcedo’s ‘Noviembre 6 y 7’ (2000) succeeds by being uncomplicated. Although it has tiers of emotional and political strata, it is about nothing other than those two days in 1985. It is not diluted by having any corresponding conversations with the art world. The peculiarity of its form has already been contemporaneously legitimised, and it is secure in its tradition. Five years later, in 2007, Mark Wallinger won the Turner prize for his installation ‘State Britain,’ (fig 1.3) a work that like ‘Noviembre 6 y 7,’ both critiques and reminds.

‘State Britain,’ is a meticulous recreation of Brian Haw’s 40 metre long peace camp which had occupied Parliament Square since June 2001(fig 2.30. It was made up of banners, slogans, handmade signs and flags as well as appeals for passing motorists to ‘beep for Brian.’ Haw was originally protesting against the economic sanctions levied against Iraq and particularly the effect it was having on the country’s children. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003 he included a list of all British MP’s who had voted for the war and began to include graphic photographs of bloated, mutilated and decomposing children caught in the conflict.

In 2005 the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act was passed through Parliament, which forbade any unauthorised protests within a kilometre of Parliament Square. It was enforced during the night of July 1st 2005 when police removed Haw’s camp. Outrage at the repudiation of freedoms guaranteed in 1215 by the Magna Carta afforded Haw wide financial support and enabled a legal challenge, which he
won immediately on the 29th of July, the High Court deciding that the new law could not be retroactive and since Haw was already protesting within the exclusion zone prior to the 1st of July, he had every right to continue. In the time it took for the government to find a way around this ruling, which it eventually did through the enforcement of Health and Safety legislation, Wallinger had photographically recorded every detail of the camp.

When Wallinger exhibited ‘State Britain’ in the central hall of Tate Britain, he taped a line on the floor that indicated the real threshold of the police line. The kilometre arc bisected Wallinger’s piece making it partly legal and partly illegal. ‘State Britain’ uses the language of protest, as a facsimile it could not do anything else. Seen flatly, as an object approached in real time and real space, it is an unflinchingly political work. By its very existence it is a political work, what Yves-Alain Bois describes as ‘one of the most remarkable political works of art ever.’ But Bois’ assertion is based on what he views as ‘its actual physical context,’ and this is where the broader intention, and what I would view as the real success of Wallinger’s piece departs from the superficial experience.

The viewer’s initial encounter with this work is twofold. There is absorption and participation with the sentiments being expressed and the images being submitted, which are unambiguous, distressing and horrifyingly captivating. And then there is the surprise that what has become a familiar modern manifestation of the dissident vernacular inhabits an art gallery space, and Tate Britain in particular. The display of rabble-rousing art in Tate Britain, albeit a traditional aspect of its regular fare, has until now been mannerly, and rarely overtly venomous.
It is precisely this ‘physical context’ which stops it being singularly or dominantly a work of activist art, even though it does work as such. Whereas Brian Haw’s camp is specifically ‘Iraq’ centred. For Wallinger, as the title implies, the Iraq conflict is only a backdrop to ‘State Britain.’ The real focus, like so much of Wallinger’s practice to date, is Britain, and Britishness. Although Wallinger is known to share Haw’s anti-war feeling, stating in his acceptance speech of his Turner Prize ‘Bring home the troops. Give us back our rights. Trust the people.’ And it is this peculiar context, the simple fact that a mess of protest paraphernalia is strewn across an art gallery which allows ‘State Britain’ to unfold more slowly and to speak more substantially, although less broadly and therefore less influentially, because as members of the art going public minority, we understand that nothing is ever just what it seems when it is in a gallery such as Tate Britain. Even if we do not understand the subtext or the context in which something should be viewed, we at least understand that the art object lives in conjunction with other elements which subsequently provide for a layering of meaning. And there are two distinct layers that lie outside of Bois’s credible but simplistic description, and which offer a more sustained and essential critical dialogue.

Firstly, ‘State Britain’ can be seen as a continuum of Wallinger’s broader practice, the exploration of Britishness as an apologue for identity, frequently referencing mythical events and modern social iconography in an examination of national inclusion and affinity. He examines the notion of a nation state becoming a divine and celestial entity in itself, an unquestioned nirvana either side of which any unhappiness must be the result of individual weakness and feeblemindedness. In 2000 Walinger made ‘Threshold to the Kingdom,’ where he filmed the opening and shutting of the automatic doors at the International Arrivals hall at London City Airport. Cleaverly
edited and combined with Allegri's setting of Psalm 51, known as 'Miserere Mei', or 'Miserere,' which begins with the words, 'Have mercy on me,' it produces a religious, redemptive presence where the doors offer up the saved, and those who are to be included. Like Salcedo's 'Shibboleth,' the doors are a transitional metaphor, identifying those who belong. But Wallinger is pouring scorn on the arbitrary nature of borders, on UK immigration and asylum laws and the absurdity of rituals that inflate the importance of geography and the random chance of nationality. What Rachael Withers calls 'authoritarian hocus-pocus.' And it is hocus-pocus and a sleight of hand that Wallinger uses to confound and besmirch those who hide behind the perceived order and authority of Tate Britain as a museum institution. 'Threshold' and 'State Britain' both pour scorn on the relationship that contemporary visual practice has become locked into, acting as it does as a servant of the 'Culture Industry.' 'Threshold' satirises the racial certainties that brought about the Institutional building blocks on which this industry is modelled. 'State Britain' literally fills one of the institutions with the detritus of anti-establishment sentiment. In doing so Wallinger exposes the absurdity of the Tate's decision to allow him to recreate Haw's camp, which itself becomes a circular metaphor. He digs at the fragility of an Institution which was founded on morally dubious resources but which now seeks to redefine itself as a bastion of all things liberal and uninhibited. And it also helps to denounce as a confused adjunct the trivial 'industry' debate over categorisation, in which Adrian Searle questions whether 'State Britain' was 'a protest, a readymade, a simulation, an appropriation,' 'an installation, an institutional critique,' or 'an example of relational aesthetics.' In fact it was all those things, but with a hierarchy of intent. But the most potentially problematic element which is only so if one considers the specific events that Haw's camp argues against, which means that its
misreading could seem an insensitive conceit, is the element of satire contained in Wallinger’s reworking. This is not aimed at Haw or his commitment, or at the combatants, but at the disjunct between the amount of information a citizen might rightly expect to be given, particularly at a time of war, and the lack of information with which one becomes satisfied. Wallinger also sneers at the sloganeering that passes for political dialogue, ‘Stop the War,’ ‘Trust the People,’ ‘Read My Lips,’ ‘Time for Change,’ ‘Arbeit Macht Frei.’ Wallinger rails at the devaluation of ideas, reduced to interchangeable off-the-peg concepts to fit any set of unfolding circumstances. Take Tony Blair’s statement ‘When I pass protesters every day at Downing Street, and believe me, you name it, they protest against it, I may not like what they call me, but I thank God they can, that’s called freedom.’ While not necessarily an entirely inaccurate and oft stated position of office, this does represent the kind of ideological fluff that can comfortably accommodate the removal from his gaze of a placard like, ‘You lie, Kids Die.’ The result of this is not only the debasement of the democratic imperative, but that overnight, literally in this case, Haw’s peace camp became an historical artefact, a curio from pre-‘Serious Organised Crime and Police Act’ Britain. Correspondingly, Tate Britain’s function morphs to become that of a history museum instead of an art gallery, the pre-requisite time-lapse by which an object becomes an artefact having been reduced to the same interchangeable status mobility that marries the car boot sale with the antique auction.

That ‘State Britain’ is most easily read casually as a continuation of Haw’s campaign does not relegate this work to the status of a prank or a two fingered gesture. Primarily, ‘State Britain’ exploits the mutual compatibility of Wallinger’s own belief that the war in Iraq is unjust, with his critical examination of the institutions that lend weight and proxy legitimacy to the very establishment that took the country to war.
The art establishment is keen to be associated with the libertarian aspirations of the 'culture industry' and insistent, perhaps disingenuously, that it defends its independence. Wallinger exploits Tate Britain to both construct and describe farce, while Tate Britain exploits Wallinger as proof of its own liberal credentials and as a demonstration that it is free from political interference, even during an unpopular war. And this might appear an overly anxious declaration unless understood in the context of the 18 appointments made to the board of governors at the BBC during the Thatcher era, 11 of whom were regarded by her as being 'one of us.'

Wallinger is biting the hand that is feeding him, sneering at an institution that makes capital out of dissent. Had he simply wanted to continue Haw's protest he could have used the £90,000 he spent on reproducing the peace camp, to fund Haw to take it on a tour of the country, or to special sporting events. But Wallinger chose to have an expensive bespoke version installed in a state financed public museum, a place well versed in liberal orthodoxies, a territory where there is little chance of the audience learning anything new, or even seditious. This is not to say that the art gallery is an ineffective environment for activist art. Indeed when work is viewed outside of traditional art venues, audience expectation can create an overpowering response. The incongruity can become overly domineering and provide an unwelcome and distorting contextual distraction. But the prevailing external social environment bears a heavy influence on how the internal gallery sited art object is received. 'State Britain' was preaching to the converted, which separated its aesthetic from its role, its aesthetic being that of political protest, its role becoming that of affirmation. But if we view this work as being 'about' its environment, then it becomes a very different, far more complex and multi layered examination of the lip service that institutions and governmental organisations pay to discordant and nonconformist opposition at a
time of war. Read as this, 'State Britain' is articulate and acerbic, although ultimately limited in its reach because the spectacle overpowers the contextual strata. But the 'hawkish' notion, that genuinely fair and democratic nations might actively police the globe in order to enforce an authoritarian liberalism becomes inspirationally remote given what we know about how The Serious Organised Crime and Police Act was tailored to fit the irritant Brian Haw. 'State Britain' is a statement that Britain has no moral authority. The subtlety of this suggestive tenet, that when trust has been lost in those who decide issues of moral significance on our behalf, the democratic agreement should be revoked, is a more sustainable, more catalytic agent for long term change than an art that simply charts events and offers critically specific commentary. While commenting, appraising or judging particular events or circumstances can have positive effects, as we have seen with Salcedo's 'Noviembre 6 y 7,' the intemperate institutional self-gratification which creates this cyclical mentality provides a more gainful target.

Any survey of the problems that are typically encountered as part of an art practice which aims to convince an audience of the need for change would be deficient without reference to Hans Haacke. Not necessarily because Haacke is the most successful activist artist, but his antagonism toward museums and galleries for what he regards as their distorting effect on public opinion, has led to some high-profile and epic Mexican stand offs, on which his reputation as a political artist has come to be seen to have been defined. And the principles on which he has fought, and the changes in technology, political convention and taste that have both reinforced and at times appeared to trivialise his work when it is viewed outside of its historical context, reference a wide community of artists who to a varying degree of success and categorisation, embrace the notion of art as a vehicle for change.
Like Wallinger’s ‘State Britain,’ Hans Haacke’s installation ‘Freedom Is Now Simply Going to be Sponsored out of Petty Cash,’ (1990) jabs at the very conditions which issue him licence, and was part of ‘The Furniture of Freedom’ project for which Boltanski produced ‘Missing House.’ It was created within what had been the ‘death strip’ that separated East and West Berlin, and on top of the watchtower Haacke attached a huge revolving neon lit Mercedes logo that aped the advertisement in the central shopping area of what was West Berlin. On the two sides adjacent to ‘Freedom is Now Simply Going to be Sponsored Out of Petty Cash,’ which was made out of huge steel letters, he added a quote from Shakespeare, ‘To be prepared is everything,’ and from Johann Wolfgang Goethe, ‘Art remains art.’ He also replaced the tower’s windows with reflective mirror glass, aping expensive hotels and office buildings of the period.

The tower monumentalises the inevitability of the expansion of multinational corporate capitalism. But just as ‘State Britain’s major flaw is that it is most dominantly understood as an extension of Haw’s protest, so too is the tower’s impact diminished as a one-trick political wonder, through time becoming just another skyline advertisement, this time sardonically advertising a counter view with a comic late warning, itself becoming quickly dulled through familiarity and the tiredness of its repeat punch line. However, like ‘State Britain,’ Haacke’s tower has a hierarchy of intent. Although unlike ‘State Britain,’ it is not reliant on the obtrusive safety of the gallery sanctuary to stimulate its critical meaning. But Wallinger and Haacke are both attacking the very institutions that sustain the art world. ‘Freedom is Now Simply Going to be Sponsored out of Petty Cash,’ refers to Mercedes Benz’ status as, on the one hand, an almost unparalleled sponsor of art, and on the other, its equally sought-after supply of military equipment to repressive regimes across the globe,
including South Africa during the apartheid era and Iraq under Saddam Hussain. Mercedes Benz’ use of forced labour to manufacture engines for Hitler’s tanks was recognised in the 1990’s through a compensation scheme to benefit surviving slave labourers.

‘Freedom is Now Simply Going to be Sponsored out of Petty Cash’ is part of a traditional form of visual dialogue that piggy backs institutional, governmental or state critical analysis in a duel biopsy that appraises the health, or otherwise, of the art world. This work is a thematic continuation of Haacke’s 1969 piece ‘Gallery Goers Birthplace and Residence Profile’(fig 3.3). Displayed in the Howard Wise gallery in New York, it consisted of a series of large scale maps of New York City, taking in a fifty mile radius. Visitors were asked to place a red pin on the borough where they were born, and a blue pin on their current place of residence. Two years later, at the Paul Maenz Gallery in Cologne, he installed a 40 metre presentation of the 732 collected Manhattan addresses, which exposed the ‘Gallery Goers’ as mostly living in the affluent areas of the city, the Upper West Side and the loft districts. Although Haacke passed no comment about the visual data, the implication of his study is clear, that art palaces do not entice a broad section of the population and so are severely restricted in the delivery of message and meaning. But the presentation of this work in Cologne which has such a different social cartography from that of New York, due both to historical local cultural precedent, and the R.A.F, reduces this work to an anthropological event rather than a live critical experience. Even if the ‘Gallery Goers’ of Cologne recognise themselves reflected in the Manhattan data, there is sufficient difference to allow for audience negation of the contextual implications represented. But when M T M Bijvoet’s suggests that ‘The observer could actively participate in the work of art’ he is mistaking visual innovation and
the directness of Haacke's thesis, with what we now know as relational aesthetics. Although the participant could see the chits that had already been filled out due to the transparency of the collection box, and so could recognise and analyse the emergent pattern of information, this work had far less 'change pedigree' than subsequent works. It merely pointed to a problem without offering, or expecting any alternatives.

Haacke exploited the viewer admirably, but did not 'include' them in this work. 'Gallery Goers and Birthplace Residence Profile,' is significant in that it marks Haacke's development of systems theories as a means of smoking out unpalatable, unjust, immoral or absurd realities, a point where data becomes an aesthetic rather than merely a technological by-product. It led to a series of works that not only included the viewer, but relied on their participation. 'MOMA-Poll' 1970, was reliant on a chain of engagement that stretched outside the gallery and into the real world. It invited the viewer to respond to the question, 'Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina Policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?' He allowed MOMA no time to reach a position on this piece, installing it the night before the opening, and this at a time of national soul searching coming only a month after the Ohio National Guard had killed four students at Kent State University as they protested against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. As a result of the killings, 4 million students protested, closing over a 900 universities and colleges in a series of student strikes. In New York, artists picketed galleries and asked the public to boycott art schools, art institutions and all museums in a general strike. This was the climate 'MOMA Poll' thrust itself into. Speaking retrospectively in 1984, Haccke said 'it would have been quite unwise for the Modern, during the election campaign of Nelson Rockefeller, to censor a work
dealing with the brother-in-law of the museum’s president. It would have backfired. By attacking Rockefeller, who was considering a run at the presidency, he was attacking the Rockefeller clan, who were hugely influential in the cultural life of the City as well as major contributors to MOMA’s coffers. But Haacke had no choice other than to alienate himself from this paternalistic environment, which he succeeded in doing. As a self-inflicted wound, it was an essential liberation. And in this respect his decision mirrored that of Tate Britain when it sheltered Haw’s recalibrated protest, both acts being declarations of independence, however questionable the Tate’s might be. Haacke’s career rested on his effective denunciation of the old order and his affirmation of self-determination and independence. His 1972 piece, ‘Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a real time social system, as of May 1, 1971,’ (fig 4.3) succeeded in igniting his profile and propelling his status, albeit with a high level of risk, to that of artist celebrity. It was a risk that I would suggest was calculated.

‘Shapolsky et al’ was due to form part of Haacke’s first major solo show, curated by Edward Fry and scheduled for the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum. The show was designed to chart Haacke’s development from painting into sculpture and onto conceptual works. At the age of 35, this would have represented an extraordinarily significant expansion of Haacke’s reputation. But ‘Shapolsky et al’ a systems exposé gleaned from the public records at the New York County Clerk’s office, succeeded in biting the hand that was attempting to feed him so assiduously, that the offer of nourishment was withdrawn.

‘Shapolsky et al’ consisted of 146 photographic views of city tenement buildings, six transaction displays with maps of Harlem and the links that connected them with the Shapolsky Real Estate Group. Each photograph is accompanied by a descriptive
text that details the location and financial machinations that relate to the specific building in view. Between 1951 and 1971 the syndicate bought and sold mortgaged properties, plying them between the seventy different companies that made up the group. The incentive lay in the interest that arose from the mortgage payments, which was tax-deductable. The majority of the properties were in Harlem and the Lower East Side, both areas of considerable depravation, and this represented the largest property grouping to be controlled by a single interest.

Although there has never been any evidence to say that Harry Shapolsky, who headed the group, had any business or personal connections with the Guggenheim trustees, the suspicion has always existed, due in part to the dramatic action of the Guggenheim’s director, Thomas Messer, who cancelled the show and sacked the curator, Edward Fry, after Haacke refused to allow his work to be censored. But whatever the truth, the episode laid bare the hidden power structures that were to become a cornerstone of Haacke’s practice. This is not to say that he was not genuinely aggrieved by the propagation and perpetuation of squalid housing conditions in this specific instance. But his aim was a more general assault on the links between the often unsubstantiated but widely recognised immorality of corporate America, as well as the arts in its broadest sense. It was the breadth, the precision and the precedent of Haacke’s target that attracted Messer’s condemnation and triggered the resultant occupation of the Guggenheim by artists as well as the successful boycott of the museum by the public. This is just the kind of publicity disaster that Haacke expected would have blighted the MOMA had they censored him two years earlier.

To understand how radical an imprint Haacke’s activism had on contemporary art institutions and cultural foundations of the period, and how necessary his voluntary
removal from their sphere of containment became, it is useful to examine the 14 years that followed the Guggenheim bear trap, years that are regarded inaccurately as wilderness years in Haacke's career. It is true that important high profile U.S museums were wary of him, his next solo show at a major New York venue did not come until 1986 at The Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. However, a cursory survey of Haacke's activities between the years 1972 to 1986 describes an artist who had not only found financial and creative independence, which came in the form of a full-time teaching appointment in the Art School of The Cooper Union in New York, and subsequent granting of tenure in 1975, but one which details 23 solo shows, as well as his inclusion in 13 group exhibitions. Although the majority of the solo shows were in Europe, 7 in Germany and 3 in England, 8 were in the U.S. This included a 1977 show at The Wadsworth Atheneum in Connecticut, the oldest public art museum in the country which had institutional links with the Smithsonian Institution, as well as a 1979 show at the Renaissance Society on the campus of the University of Chicago. In 1973 he was the recipient of The Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship of the same family that Thomas Messer was at such pains to protect. He was also appointed guest professor in two German universities over the period. This is not the curriculum vitae of an artist humbled, nor is it that of an artist continuing his practice against the odds. Rather Haacke should be viewed as having made a tactical retreat after having inflicted what at first appeared to be a superficial institutional flesh wound, but one which through lack of care, was to become fatal.

Haacke's oppositionality should not be viewed as a precursor of what Walter Grasskamp describes as the 'scandal aesthetic' of the 1980's. Haacke's system theories were rooted in the protests of the 1960's and early 1970's. They were about
change, not shock, they sought to aestheticise previously only verbalised notions.

'Shapolsky et al' is significant in a survey of activist art because it is an example of how the fluidity of social change forces art of this kind to re-calibrate itself in order to respond to evolving social and political circumstances. 'Shapolsky et al' was of its time, both thematically and visually. Although corruption and exploitation are still a significant blight, investigative documentary making, even in the form of television entertainment now leave little room for indiscreet fraudulent practices. In 1972 Haacke was responding to activities that were going unchecked and in so doing was ploughing his own career. But as the appetite for scandal increased, emblematic of which was the National Enquirer hitting a circulation of 1 million in 1966, Haacke's methodology became less efficient, which is not to say redundant. It was simply not the best medium, it had become less fit for its purpose. And so it is no accident that Haacke began to look toward the morally and ethically dubious, as opposed to the contemporary legal frameworks of such couplings, as seen in 'Freedom Is Now Simply Going to be sponsored Out of Petty Cash,' and which has as its direct genesis his 1978 work, 'A Breed Apart,' in which he exposed the entirely legal sale by the then state-owned British Leyland, of vehicles to the police and military in apartheid South Africa. These works critique corporate integrity rather than simple criminality. And such expedient unions remain common-place. An example of which was the ability of the French oil company 'Total' to complete its construction in 2001 of the Yadana natural gas pipe line from Burma to Thailand, using slave labour, despite European Union sanctions against the Burmese military dictatorship.

What happened in the intervening 23 years between 'A Breed Apart' and the pipeline's completion goes some way to explaining why there has not been a rash of well aimed art attacking the actions of Total. The strength and sophistication of
media campaign strategies by non-governmental organisations and campaign groups has surpassed the ability of art to effect change directly. Activist art can too easily be left playing catch up, and for no good reason. For example Burma Campaign UK’s involvement in Total’s agreement to set up a £3.5 million humanitarian fund which while not the end of the matter, the campaign’s director, Yvette Mahon stating ‘if they think that this agreement will help take the pressure off, they make a big mistake,’ it does at the very least, represent something tangible.

This is not to bemoan the passing of an era when a work like ‘MOMA Poll’ could so articulate a previously dumb acknowledgement and have an undeniable effect, albeit most usually unquantifiable. And Haacke’s prescient 1971 statement, that ‘Information presented at the right time and in the right places can potentially be very powerful. It can affect social fabric,’ is still true 38 years later. It is just that the places have become fewer and the times less frequent. Art, and the spaces it inhabits, has a decreasing sphere of influence as other more intellectually egalitarian forms of media connect with an increasingly protest-savvy society. That ‘MOMA Poll’ would not work today is a positive manifestation of protest and accountability having matured into a mainstream framework. If a work was presented today with such a specific factual denunciation of a political candidate, it would itself be denounced as propaganda. Not because it would be taking a position, but because the sufficiency of outlets for a considered dialogue would render the rudeness of its message an inappropriate interjection, a cold call at mealtime. The idea that the public would not now be aware of a politician’s support, or otherwise, for a deviant foreign adventure would itself be the scandal, and not the individual’s stance. ‘Shapolsky et al’ is therefore a fascinating historical document, both of an art that has passed, and more prosaically, a business model that is at the very least, required to be much cleverer.

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The aspect of Haacke’s practice that is most aesthetically and thematically time resistant, is his eco-visualisations, works in which he not only seeks to steward environmental awareness, but also to vilify those multinational syndicates to whom pollution is viewed as collateral damage, an inevitable consequence of progress. In 1972, Haacke made, ‘Rhine Water Purification Plant’ (fig 5.3). This was a durational installation set in a huge gallery space in The Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, Germany. Set in front of a large window that looked out onto gardens, was a series of glass bottles, filled with highly polluted water from the Krefeld sewage plant, which had been sourced from the nearby Rhine river, which was pumped through filters that eventually sanitized it. The water was systematically dripped into an oversized tank which was filed with gold fish, their health being proof of the waters purity. The excess water was fed through the window onto the museums gardens in an early example of grey water recycling. This was an indictment of practices that had seen the Rhine turned into an open sewer, the city of Krefeld itself discharging 42 million cubic metres of untreated industrial and household waste into the river. And pointedly, the Haus Lange Museum is a municipal institution, an arm of the same authority which sanctions such excretions.

This was also a time of high profile ecological disasters. In 1967 the oil tanker ‘Torrey canyon’ struck a rock between the Scilly Islands and Lands End. 31,000,000 gallons of oil leaked into the sea, blighting the south coast of Britain and the Normandy shore and killing huge amounts of marine life. In 1969, Ohio’s Cuyahoga River had become so contaminated with industrial pollutants that it caught fire. Haacke’s ‘Rhine Water Purification Plant’ captured perfectly the popular mood. Years of successful lobbying by polluters against Federal regulations, who argued that pollution prevention would lead to the collapse of business and create mass
unemployment, had allowed for the system of voluntary compliance to remain intact. But sensational images of burning rivers, of a barren lake Erie entirely bereft of fish, and Californian beaches saturated in oil after offshore oil well blowouts became politically unsustainable, and in 1972 Congress enacted the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, its aim to make all waters sustainable for marine life and safe to swim in by 1988.

Haacke’s eco-visualisations are significant not simply for the way that they traverse the shifting landscape of cultural dynamics. They also illustrate how untidy reputations are, both when charting careers in a traditionally historical perspective, as well as when defining effective delivery of intent, or success. It was only at this point that Haacke began to be described primarily as a political artist. Given the overt nature of ‘MOMA Poll,’ an installation which it is difficult to imagine being more political, work about environmental degradation should be seen as representing the acceptable face of political inclusion. This is an area which it is tacitly agreed, if only through the weight of historical precedent, that the artist has the right to roam, a licence that I would argue Haacke extended back into the legislative edifice. He achieved this, with varying levels of success, by not going away. Those who deny his political content do so through a limited party or ideological definition, one which fails to recognise the anachronistic structure of left and right wing factional politics. If we consider the essential and recurring theme behind Haacke’s practice as being what Grasskamp calls ‘the way in which managers and politicians instrumentalise art,’14 we must then view Haacke as political even though ‘Rhine Water Purification Plant,’ which I am using emblematically as being representative of all his eco-visualisations, is at contextual variance from his broader practice when seen as a career body of work.
Grant Kester is correct in his assertion that the art world provides a ‘relatively narrow space for work like Haake’s that critiques powerful entities like the sewage treatment facility,’\(^{15}\) which is why the art world is often by-passed. But these limited opportunities are only problematic when the artist has a ‘limiting’ profile, which as I have charted, was not the case for Haacke post Guggenheim, his exhibition at the Museum Haus Lange being his first solo showing since the Guggenheim debacle. And while it is a comparatively modest venue, it represents dialogue, a little bit of a great deal still being a lot. The problem with ‘Rhine Water Purification Plant,’ which is its beauty, is an understandable over-aestheticisation in the struggle to make manifest a social and ecological concern, with the resultant moderation of its language. This is at odds with the voice of its foe, which will exploit ill-considered populist political assumptions to maintain the status quo, for example the risk to jobs. And so the fact that the Rhine is dirty, and can easily be made so clean that it can sustain exotic fish, could be seen as self-defeating because such knowledge could lend weight to an argument for damage reversal being instigated at a time to suit economic rather than environmental priorities. If it can be cleaned up so easily, then the pollution could continue until such a time when the region could sustain their economic growth through alternative industries.

The problems that surround ‘Rhine Water Purification Plant’ and lessen its efficiency as a piece of activist art, highlight the issue of appropriateness of approach. It is this initial proposition, the commissioning of a bespoke working methodology to fit the specific purpose of the assault, that is a determining factor in assessing successful outcomes, what one might describe as the best tool for the job, the most appropriate and potentially fruitful and most communicative technique.
To assess the success of an activist work on the basis of viewer numbers can be an inaccurate marker. Simply because an art object has been seen by a large number of people does not necessarily mean that the audience has been infected by the required concern. The peculiarity of the spectacle, which I have already touched on, is often so dominant that the internal thesis is overlooked or quickly disengaged. Having unfamiliar objects placed in familiar everyday settings can be disconcerting. Being told that they are art does not lessen the disorientating effect. And so a dedicated art space or gallery, which is a much maligned environment for politically orientated work, can provide a 'quiet' place away from the inevitable environmental and circumstantial interferences of the real world. There is an expectation that one might find odd, challenging or difficult objects or images in an art gallery and so the shock or surprise does not overwhelm the perception of meaning as it can when it is witnessed in a more conventional, domestic or civic environment. But a broader examination of the pros' and cons' of the gallery versus the external public or non-art space would be fraught with inaccuracies and assumptions. This is because for most artists, even some with high-profile international reputations, the liberty to pick and choose venues does not exist. And the negotiations into which artists might enter, which may involve compromises made with curators and venue management of which they might not be proud, are usually private occurrences. Guerrilla tactics that artists adopt in order to have their work seen are regularly misconstrued as being subversive acts of repudiation, political acts in themselves, quite apart from that which is on view.

In October 2003, Banksy smuggled into Tate Britain a picture of a rural landscape with a police incident cordon stencilled across it. It hung undiscovered for several hours. Such was the audacity of the event, that it became an overpowering
spectacle, the message of the installation that was to be projected, as clarified in an accompanying text, 'Banksy 1975. Crimewatch UK Has Ruined the Countryside For All Of Us. 2003. Oil on canvas,' was lost (fig 6.3). The Guardian newspaper's take on it was headed 'Grafiti artist cuts out middle man to hang his work in the Tate.' However, by June 2009, Bristol City Museum Art Gallery was hosting 'Banksy Vs Bristol Museum,' a vast solo exhibition of his work. And while the show managed to retain the vitriol and humour that is emblematic of his practice, it remains to be seen if Banksy will manage to maintain his venom through an extended embrace by the art establishment. But it is not necessarily this embrace in itself that could have the capacity to water down his critique; it is the potential for his audience to start to produce its own anti-bodies, to develop a resistance through prolonged contact. If a creature has four legs and barks then it is safe to assume that it is a dog. But if the dog eats at its master's table is it less of a dog, or through its cunning, more of one? The answer would be dependant not only on who had designed the species categorisation, but how well the dog conformed to the pattern of its behaviour class, prior to it elevation. Banksy began his career making work illegally, on other people's property and without their permission. As the acerbic quality of his work found fame, he started to work on property by invitation, legitimately, although the aesthetic style remained that of the guerrilla. The transition between the street and the gallery or art space happened before June 2009. The assumption that his inclusion at the top table marks a point of content departure is a false one. However there is a clear museum aesthetic evolving, evident most clearly in his sculpture of a burnt out graffiti covered ice cream van topped with an outsized melted ice cream cone. Works such as this have been possible since his 2006 Los Angeles warehouse show where he is estimated to have netted up to £3 million, as well as becoming front
page news in the *New York* and *Los Angeles Times*. Audience inoculation through familiar expectation is not sufficiently problematic to damn the art gallery as a venue for activist art works since the illustration of absurdity and exposure of institutional and authoritarian pomposity is a sanctionable variant of activism, which is what Banksy’s works are, albeit a safe tributary of the genre. It means that the language has to be reframed regularly, due largely to the increased pace of viewer sophistication which itself is due to mainstream media coverage of events like the Turbine Hall’s extravagances. The need to reframe visual language inside the gallery space is nothing new. It is the speed and dexterity required by those doing the reframing which is new.

When Tiffany Holmes discusses what she describes as ‘artist’s attempts to *bring the work out into the real world*’ she cites Kester’s statement that the ‘level of *toleration diminishes rather rapidly*.’ Seen as an historical observation specifically descriptive of the world into which ‘Rhine Water Purification Plant’ was born, it demonstrates a huge shift in public anticipation. A Banksey stencil piece on the side of a sexual health clinic close to his ‘Banksy Vs Bristol City Museum’ show, which depicts a man gazing out of a window with a semi naked woman standing beside him while a nude male hangs desperately below the window sill, has been shot with blue paint balls. The *Bristol Evening Post* ‘*another mural vandalised, has British artist Banksy sold out*,’ suggests that this was an act of vandalism by those who felt that Banksy had allowed himself to be compromised. A Bristol City Councilor, Gary Hopkins stated, ‘I think this attack is basically by people who think that Banksy has become part of the establishment.’

Claes Oldenburg’s anti Vietnam War sculpture, ‘*Lipstick (ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*’ 1969-74(fig 7.3), consists of a 24 foot tall lipstick, placed on tank tracks.
which was originally installed at the Art School at Yale University. From what we know about American University campuses at this time, this would have been a site of convivial friction, a place of peaceful and safe protest prior to the events at Kent State the following year. The inclusion of ‘Lipstick’ as a sculptural work in its own right as opposed to a protest icon of the 1960’s, took 27 years when it was embraced as part of ‘Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology,’ at the Guggenheim and Hayward Galleries in 1996. This is opposed to Banksey’s comparatively immediate ennoblement. And it is difficult see Banksy’s ice cream van (fig 8.3) without comparing it to Oldenburg’s ‘Lipstick.’ But in surveying what is, and what was tolerated, and how one must consider a ‘type’ of audience, and social climate, we are brought back to considering what should be understood by a work being ‘fit for purpose.’

A work that might be powerful, gripping and articulate, but which disengages the viewer, either by intellectual alienation, by proposing a singular view that runs counter and is non persuasive in its dialogue, or that irritates through its physical imposition in the environment is not ‘fit for purpose’ and so redundant as a catalyst for change. Oldenburg’s ‘Lipstick’ would not have survived in many sites across the US in 1969 other than University campuses. In its initial incarnation it was made of plywood and so extremely vulnerable to physical criticism. It is easy for the artist to lose sight of shifts in public expectations and public tolerance, just as Banksey’s public are becoming intolerant of his perceived tolerance. ‘Banksey Vs Bristol Museum’ is a far cry from the night of the 2002 Turner Prize announcement when he painted ‘mind the crap’ on the steps of the Tate. But any work that is not sufficiently tolerated to allow its viewing, or is deliberately destroyed and does not see the light of day, is in terms of activist art a decisive failure, unless its destruction is in itself
conceptually relevant, as was the case with the 33ft 'Goddess of Democracy' (fig. 9.3) that was built by protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989. And so in this respect a work like 'Rhine Water Purification Plant' was not without merit. Because exposure is such a fundamental component of activist art, the profile of the artist becomes a major factor. Pedigree and status plays a more important role in activist art than in other, less febrile genres. Since the message, and so its delivery is the most important thing, any means of transmission is legitimate. And so the exploitation of one's notoriety is just another tool, and in the case of activist art, this does not signify a lack of integrity or an inflated ego on the part of the artist. It does often however show a lack of courage and imagination on the part of the curator or commissioning body. More problematic still is the fact that galleries plan their exhibition schedules many months and in most cases, years in advance. This means that responding to events in a timely and relevant manner becomes extremely difficult. Having a heavyweight name and profile is a distinct advantage in clearing a path through the gallery diary. And so if one is to marry the name, such as Joseph Beuys, with a project which is clearly advantageous to all, and on all levels, such as his '7000 Oaks,' 1982-87, a monumental sculpture created as part of the 7th 'Documenta' in Kassel, projects of enormous ambition can be realised.

In persuading communities in Kassel to plant oak trees as a demonstration against deforestation and urban decay, Beuys tapped into a public sense of collective action that would not only leave their environment a better place, but for the municipal authorities did not offer a direct challenge. Its gaze could be parried away as being global. For Beuys, it was an extension of his broader thesis, nature as a shop-bought work of complete art. And so it should come as no surprise that it is not just Haacke's eco-visualisations that represent those of his works that are the least vulnerable to
the vagaries of aesthetic fads, but it is works that function as gestures of 
environmental activism in general that are resilient to changing visual tastes. The 
palette which the natural environment offers is the most resolutely static aesthetic 
principle, the antithesis of fashion. Agnes Denes’ ‘Wheatfield, a Confrontation’ is one 
such example, one which I would suggest remains to be surpassed (fig 10.3).

With two assistants, and heavily reliant on volunteers, Denes cleared a derelict four 
acre site in Lower Manhattan facing the Hudson River. Using over 225 truckloads of 
earth extracted from the foundations of the World Trade Center, she planted 1.8 
acres of wheat, having constructed an elaborate irrigation system designed to 
support the wheat’s growth cycle over the summer months. The word ‘confrontation’ 
in the title partly refers to the obvious juxtaposition of the field against the cityscape, 
being only a few blocks away from the New York stock Exchange, the clash of 
fortunes between the hungry and the opulent being subliminally reinforced. A 
thousand pounds of grain was eventually harvested from the field. The straw was 
donated to New York City police horses, and the grain toured the world as part of an 
exhibition, the ‘International Art Show for the End of World Hunger,’ 1987-1990, 
organised by the Minnesota Museum of Art. Denes was questioning what she 
termed ‘the status quo and the endless contradictions which we seem to accept into 
our lives.’

Denes highlights absurdity by growing a wheat crop that has a $158 exchange value 
on land valued at the time at $ 4.5 billion. The contemporary discrepancy could now 
be viewed as being between the billion dollar arms trade, as supported and 
facilitated by the Stock Market, and the carnage that 10 men with box cutters can
visit upon a sight three blocks from Denes' 'Wheatfield.' However the temptation to re-contextualise this work in the light of the 9.11 attacks should be avoided if its essential significance is to be maintained. Her 2002 visit to Ground Zero to document the devastation underscored what Devin Zuber describes as 'the differences between Denes’ commitment to a pragmatic idealism that art can shape a better world and the reality of recurrent geopolitical inequities.' But this attempt by Zuber at reconfiguration is at best trite, and at worst redolent of what Selzer called 'wound culture.' Renewed interest in Denes’ practice has led to a major survey of her work being mounted in May 2008 by the Ludwig Museum in Budapest. And her inclusion in the Barbican’s 'Radical Nature,' in the summer of 2009, saw the restaging of 'Wheatfield, a Confrontation,' at Dalston Mill in the east end of London, except this time with wheat uprooted from Lancashire fields creating a sad and listless copy. To try to recreate the 'Wheatfield,' or to reconfigure it in conditions understood after 9.11, is to deny the power of its poetry. When Simon Rees reviewed Denes’ Hungarian retrospective in 2009, he posted her within American Land Art, claiming that 'the image of the piece can seem like a non sequitur without seeing Denes’ other work alongside it. Readers are left guessing what the artist must have done since then.' But I would argue that the strength of this work lies in the very fact that it does precisely the opposite. Unlike 'State Britain' or 'Freedom is Now Simply Going to be Sponsored out of Petty Cash,' it asks no erroneous questions about art. Like 'Noviembre 6 y 7,' It’s contextually uncluttered, free from meaning over-embellishment. Denes’ installation is simply a wheatfield in the middle of the world’s financial epicentre, its beauty bypassing even salient questions as to its fabrication and maintenance. 'Wheatfield, a Confrontation' cuts to exactly where the
artist is pointing. And in this respect the artist becomes invisible, her torch being seen, but she remains personally unheard.

At harvest time, many residents and workers in nearby offices, were moved to tears and a campaign evolved to have the field made into a permanent and annual fixture. To try to explain this response would require a level of psychological speculation that would not take into account the variety of individual connections being made. The only collective aspect is that these people would not have been similarly affected had they been staring out of an office or tenement window in the grain belt region of the Midwest. Denes' emotional exploitation is masterly. The viewer's knowledge, or otherwise, of grain and real estate prices is less important than what they understand instinctively about their own wellbeing. The word 'confrontation' refers as much to the confrontation with ones self, infusing the political with the biographical and so making it an entirely personal experience.

What differentiates 'Wheatfield. A Confrontation,' from other land art, apart from meaning, is the visual residue caused by its lack of existence. This is not a conceptual notion, rather a pragmatic, albeit emotional one. The Wheatfield will always tangibly have been there, in a way that the land we know to have been cultivated by the Canarsie tribe nearly four hundred years earlier, is too distant to fathom. The fact that it is no longer there is as decisive a statement as its successful harvest. Robert Smithson's 'spiral Jetty', 1970, built on the shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, significantly during a drought, plays with disappearance less demonstratively. The end of the drought and return of the waters quickly covered the jetty until 2004 when it became completely exposed for almost a year. But during the years of its immersion, it still physically existed. Working as a rejection of the gallery and museum system and a denial of art as commodity, as well as an environmental
bulletin, it was by design remote and difficult to visit. And so the way that the vast majority of the jetty’s audience experienced it was through photographic documentation that records its construction and its submersions. Today it is encountered even more remotely, as an art historical artefact in need of preservation. But the exquisite photographs of Denes striding through a shimmering field of golden wheat, a combine harvester absorbed in its task with the backdrop of the Manhattan skyline, acts as a repetitive, and quiet incitement. The construction of Battery Park City over Denes’ site, with a population density of 41,032 people per square mile and where 54% of households have annual incomes over $100,000, represents another phase in the continuing life of ‘Wheatfield, a Confrontation.’ This work will only end when the photographic records anchor it only to history, instead of aspiration, be it physical or imaginative. And in this respect, like Haacke’s ‘Rhine Water Purification Plant,’ it is a durational installation, although Denes exploits time as a means of subversion rather than of sanitization. Haacke’s piece is an explicit and easily read presentation of facts, clear and definitive in its objective. But in complying so formally with the minimal/conceptual/uncanny aesthetic that had become the look, or style of the new avant garde, which was by design visually placid, the weight of its contextual aspiration became diluted. ‘Rhine Water Purification Plant’ is ‘too’ beautiful. But the beauty in Denes’ installation, ‘Wheatfield, a Confrontation,’ is different. It is sublime and emotionally, physically and intellectually engaging, as well as politically urgent. Unlike Haacke’s work it is not deferential or fashionable, and its beauty is discordant and jarring.

If one is to attempt to look toward the future of an art that aims to activate change, it would seem likely that a dominant focus would be on environmental issues, at least within a European tradition where human rights safeguards are not under the same
level of stress as in developing nations. But it is not simply because art that deals with environmental concerns is often spectacular, and sometimes beautiful, or that the gravity of the problems facing the world’s ecology is likely to remain urgently relevant for a protracted period of time. It is because increasingly, the traditional divisions of left and right wing political dogma, fail to represent individuals’ anxieties regarding issues which even within conventional party political structures, are only tribal divisions and are increasingly exposed as only paper thin and designed around short term electoral sustenance. This migration away from established democratic inertia is manifest in the coming together of people with diametrically opposed ideological predispositions who are now more inclined to unite under the banner of a single issue. Even outside of environmental activism, notions surrounding for example how best, and most ethically to execute a war, drift away from previously entrenched ideological principles. Traditional expectations of how artists should or could respond have correspondingly migrated. Relational Aesthetics, or ‘Relational Art,’ takes as its point of departure Nicolas Bourriaud’s definition of “the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” This represents the furthest most point to date where art can no longer be distinguished from any other form of human activity. It is not necessarily a point of no return, but a reconfiguration of artist behaviour that, when applied to activist art, makes it become almost indistinguishable from traditional political activism, a blurring which began long before Bourriaud’s attempts at categorisation.

Betty Beaumont’s installation, ‘Ocean Landmark,’ 1980, predates Nicolas Bourriaud’s book ‘Esthetique Relationelle’ by 16 years. Made of 500 tons of processed coal-waste, converted into 17,000 coal fly-ash blocks, and dropped from
an ocean barge onto the continental shelf 40 miles from New York Harbour, its purpose was to create a new underwater habitat for threatened marine populations. The solid surfaces of the blocks enable plants to embed and the increased concentration of food sustained original as well as new fish species. And so 'Ocean Landmark,' has had a positive quantifiable effect. It has brought about change and benefitted the local eco-system. It may also have inspired a new generation of environmental artists. But its inception, which was only a slight diversion, or intervention, into research that scientists were already undertaking into the potential of stabilized industrial by-products in water, represents a blurring of the roles between the artist and the activist. A point where the interchangeable nature of their actions highlights the 'fit for purpose' dialogue that best defines a work of activist art that can be said to be successful.

Joseph Beuys' 1971 performance artwork, 'Eine Aktion im Moor' (Bog Action) had him running through a bog, bathing in mud and swimming through a swamp ditch. In the same year, a group of concerned American and Canadian citizens returned from an abortive attempt to disrupt American Nuclear testing under Amchitka, a small island off the Alaskan coast which supported a variety of endangered species. Their efforts, as well as the significant support that they were offered by the crew of the US Naval Ship 'Confidence' which forced them to turn back, 12 of whose crew signed a petition supporting their aims, gained them huge amounts of publicity, and resulted in them organising themselves under the name 'Greenpeace.' 'Ocean Landmark' however is a poorly known art work, and Beaumont's profile is insufficient to have it cited in any meaningful way. And given the notoriety of 'Spiral Jetty,' this cannot be blamed on its inaccessible location. But there are no images of 'Ocean Landmark' due to the limited visibility around the site. Beaumont contents herself with global
positioning satellite technology and underwater remote sensing and side scan sonar to create location images. 'Ocean Landmark' highlights the tension between doing something that highlights, illustrates and draws attention, and doing something that changes. Ideally a good activist art work would do both.

Although first identified in 1956, by 1972 few outside the Japanese City of Minamata had heard of what was to become known as Minamata disease. It was caused by the Chisso Corporation's release of methyl mercury into the water system which then accumulated in fish and crustaceans and which was then ingested by the population resulting in the poisoning of 2,265 people, 1,784 of whom died. Eugene Smith's photographic essay of 1972, 'Minamata'(11.3) broadened the exposure of both the environmental and human cost of Chisso's actions. Smith's early death in 1978 came partly as a result of injuries he sustained after hired thugs in Minamata swung him by the legs against a concrete wall. This suggests that his work had caused discomfiture and financial inconvenience to those responsible for the prolonged pollution. Although Smith is categorised as a photojournalist, his essay draws attention to the pollution of the sea and the resultant dangers. Smith's profile and reputation, which was made during the battle for Iwo Jima as well as for his 1954 photo essay of Albert Schweitzer, and the fact that his medium is portable and potentially unobtrusive with its resultant images able to be displayed in a variety of formats appealing to a broad range of tastes and requirements, means that the functionality of his approach is an example of best practice.

Denes' 'Wheat field, a Confrontation,' and Smith's 'Minamata' essay represent the pragmatism, the ambition and the ruthlessness necessary to orchestrate work which challenges the status quo and effects change. While Denes' success is less quantifiable in that it does not have a defining result, both works remain live. The
photographs of 'Wheatfield' and the shared knowledge of Battery Park City as well as the urban tragedies that frame it, constantly reinvent it without reconfiguring or diluting its residue. The beauty and empathetic certainties of Smith's essay allow for a viewer connection far beyond the geography of Minamata bay. But a series of sonar readings that the viewer is asked to trust is Beaumont's 'Ocean Landmark' is an inadequate engagement device even though it has brought about a positive effect. There is no connection beyond the purely pragmatic or scientific.

Salcedo's 'Noviembre 6 y 7,' Denes' 'Wheatfield, a confrontation,' and Smith's 'Minamata' essay all have two things in common. None of them are saying anything about art or the art world, and all three contain elements which can be described as beautiful. And this beauty is not outside of the works' contextual framework.

'Wheatfield' is both visually and conceptually beautiful. 'Minamata' describes the confluence of beauty and pathos, both within human relationships as well as within a blighted landscape, while 'Noviembre 6 y 7' illustrates a ceremonial beauty which is inexplicable and ancient. This does not mean that a work needs to be beautiful to work effectively. There are many examples of works which propagate important dialogue and which can be said to be ugly and disturbing, although to be physically repulsive would represent the antithesis of an art which aims to engage. But the beauty contained in these three works is not a disabling, aestheticising beauty which overpowers meaning. Rather it is a sensory manifestation which creates connections beyond simple pleasure and which allows the work time resilience. Their beauty launches significance rather than becomes the significance. And in this respect, beauty can be considered just another engagement device, but one which has been appropriated along with other mechanisms successfully deployed in the making of activist art, by a new imposter aesthetic.
CHAPTER 3 NOTES


7. Shakespeare, W. 'The Merchant of Venice,' Act 4, scene 1, thought to have been written between 1596-1598.


16. Morris, S. 'Graffiti artist cuts out the middle man to get his work hanging in the Tate,' *Guardian* [on-line] 18 October 2003  [http://www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) [accessed 18 June, 2009].


Chapter 4 – Ersatz and the Appropriation of Pedigree

Between the 18th of April and the 21st of June 2009, Modern Art Oxford staged ‘Transmission Interrupted,’ an exhibition of painting, sculpture, photography, film and performance by fourteen artists. In the press release, the exhibition is described as demonstrating “art’s ability to make visible and audible what remains unseen and unheard at a time when free speech and democracy are invoked as universal values to which we can all subscribe.” While the summoning of ‘universal values’ itself might represent a divisive assumption, the show is only political in that a number of the works tackle current human experiences head on. However ‘Transmission Interrupted’ is worth examining at length not because it is unique, but for its very ubiquity. This is a ‘type’ of exhibition, a type which casts out visual hooks which are so heavily imbued with false gravitas, that the question of ‘how,’ or ‘if the work actually speaks audibly, is rarely asked. This ‘type’ of exhibition has so become the norm, that politically-smelling art has become mainstream, a marriage of questionable convenience between the radical visual confrontations of the 1960’s and 1970’s and the consumable frivolities of the 1980’s and 1990’s. The result of this marriage is a child that is neither, rather than both. But in seeking antidotes, which is the job of every avant-garde construct, the sobriety required to reflect our peculiar times is mistaken for being a force for change, an actively engaged catalyst. The look of radicalism has become the tradition. The content and the intent has been glazed over by glib assumptions that art which is thematically about important and relevant issues is contributing to the debate. And this assumption is cyclical in that it presupposes that a debate even exists. ‘Transmission Interrupted’ offers a useful summary of a pervasive trend, one which through its exploitation of populist anti-
establishment iconoclasm and spectacular absurdity, has brought contemporary art
to a much wider constituency, but at the cost of conviction, the possibility of
engendering change and the confrontation of nonsense. To examine this tendency I
have initially concentrated on four works.

Julia Meltzer and David Thorne’s video piece, ‘It’s not my memory of it: three
recollected documents,’ (2003),(fig 1.4) consists of interlocking narratives that
coalesce around government conspiracy theories including a 1974 CIA film about the
burial of six Soviet sailors as well as the 2002 targeted missile strike by the CIA in
Yemen which killed Al Qaeda leader, Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi.

Sislej Xhafa’s live performance piece ‘Elegant Sick Bus,’ (2001/9)(fig 2.4), involved a
bus which had been coated in reflective metallic film being pushed through Oxford by
a team of unemployed men until it came to a halt on a grass verge next to Oxford
castle.

Adel Abdessemed’s piece ‘Practice Zero Tolerance,’ (2006)(fig 3.4) is a burned out
car made from blackened terracotta which references urban riots and in particular
the civil unrest in the northern suburbs of Paris in 2005 which mainly resulted in the
burning of cars as well as some public buildings.

Michael Rakowit’s piece, ‘The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist, (recovered,
missing, stolen series)’ (2007)(fig 4.4), is an attempt to reconstruct the
archaeological artefacts that have been recorded as stolen, or are missing from the
Iraqi National Museum after the 2003 invasion. It used the display idiom of the
historical museum whereby the missing objects are reconstructed through the use of
junk, such as newspapers and food packaging, all from the Middle East. Rakowitz
creates his narrative through meticulous research, recording the status, or
whereabouts of each object as well as the actual events that surrounded their removal. Deep Purple's 1972 song, 'Smoke on the Water' recorded by the Iraqi cover band, 99%, provides a soundtrack as a nod to the previous director of the National Museum Dr Donny George, who was also the band's drummer before being forced into exile in Syria.

These four pieces provide the dominant offering within 'Transmission Interrupted' and are the works most frequently referenced in accounts of the exhibition, an exhibition which Pauline Bache claims is asking three questions. "How does society affect the art we make? Can art alter our perceptions of the world around us? Does art serve a purpose outside of the ornamental." All three are important fundamental questions that are not given any extra weight simply because the summer of 2009 was by any standards, an unprecedentedly politically laden period. But the questions Bache attributes to 'Transmission Interrupted' are a staple of any continuous evaluative process and lend themselves more readily to an A level syllabus than a conference of 14 international artists. Nevertheless, Bache should be forgiven for the modesty of the tasks she attributes to these works because none of them attempt anything more than a cursory and superficial incitement to further understanding and go no way toward effecting change. All four simply illustrate the known, like a genre novel where the reader finds comfort in the familiar conventions, a literary gestalt where the nature of the protagonist leads inextricably to the action long before it has taken place. This is ersatz activism, and Meltzer and Thorne's piece, 'It's not my memory of it,' is emblematic of this genre and best represents the menace of exhibitions like 'Transmission Interrupted.' It tells us what we already know, that things happen and that things get covered up. There are numerous television
production companies devoted to the subject, the public thirst for conspiracy having morphed from the grassy knoll into family entertainment.

This is all that Meltzer and Thorne’s piece does, it entertains. It is just interesting, and just a little shocking in the same way that watching your house being burgled on CCTV is still shocking even after you have received the insurance cheque, but in the same way that watching someone else’s house being burgled on CCTV is more sustainably entertaining. And like so many works that have the sniff of ‘activism’ about them, ‘It’s not my memory of it,’ is best analysed in terms of how it could have worked, what it could have invoked. And this type of analytical critique is appropriate because works that skim a working definition of activist art, even work like Boltanski’s, that are far removed from engaging an audience in the support of a pragmatic dialogue, for the most part inhabit not only the same spaces as successful activist art, but also, as I have shown in chapter 1, use a similar vocabulary. And so with distance and the privilege of hindsight as well as with the clarity of a theoretical approach as opposed to the fog of the studio, ‘what could have been,’ allied with a broader understanding of the artist’s intent can be a useful measuring stick by which to evaluate the possibilities of activist art in an attempt to produce work that is immune from the pit falls and honey traps that dog work of this kind. And it is not only problems like the over-complication of contextual references and the resultant dislocation of anything other than a narrow and pre-converted audience, as is so often the case in Salcedo’s practice. Nor the inclination toward the ‘beautiful’ and the subsequent aethetisization of the object. But it is often the case that the covenant that exists between artist and viewer, which should be one of frankness and if not already solidarity, at least one which is respectful of each other’s right to an uninterrupted view of the propositions, is in reality one of poorly considered
assumptions whereby the viewer and the artist share a set of expectations about each other that are based on fantasy. These mutual constructs come from a shorthand of categorisations that embrace class and race as well as localised and/or current social and political intrigues. For example the American artist Edward Kienholz who I will examine at length in chapter 5 made an assemblage in 1962 called 'The Illegal Operation,'(fig 5.4) Due to the confluence of both a national debate over abortion that was raging at the time, and what the viewer thought they knew about Kienholz the man, this piece was, and still is, viewed as being 'pro choice,' which it is not.

Meltzer and Thorne's video is a case in point and demonstrates three things about works of this kind. Firstly, that it is very easy to make art that is a liberal placebo. Secondly, that said placebo is highly profitable in terms of career recognition and all that comes with that, which is a strong production incentive in itself. And thirdly, and most decisively, the fact that work is made to fit the first and the second factors, means that the placebo is not even 'liberal.' I would not argue that this type of work is necessarily illiberal, because we also have to approach the word 'liberal' from a localised, dual meaning. But this work is dangerous because it looks like activist art, which it is not. And it looks like it represents a 'liberal' consensus, which enables patrons, curators, reviewer and viewers to wallow in self-congratulation, when in fact it does not. It enables nothing to happen, which would fit Roger Scruton's view that, "The only conceivable liberal order is one that remains morally neutral, standing above and beyond those particular concepts of good that motivate the various ways of life that are subsumed by it." It is Scruton's use of the word 'good' that is most significant. If it could be proven that activist art is immoral, it would not matter and it would not stop its production. This can be evidenced in the underground work that
has emerged from countries under totalitarian rule. Work made under these conditions may espouse liberty, but equality is seldom on the mind of the recently liberated. To behave well toward ones captors, to be ‘good’ to them on emancipation either metaphorically or symbolically is uncommon. But the assumptions made between viewer and artist are based around ‘good,’ and ‘liberal’ being intertwined, being mutely supportive, even interchangeable. This makes for an art that is safe, self-conscious and non productive, the enemy of pragmatic dialogue and the antithesis of activist art, although not in the way that Boltanski is. Boltanski’s overarching thesis that history, as we understand it, is unreliable and should not be trusted, does represent an important contribution as long as it is received equally with dogma and credo and acted upon vociferously, which it could never be. History as a renewable subject will always have vested interests. The logical extreme of Boltanski’s proposition would see him questioning Holocaust facts in an environment where the historical analysis of concentration camp figures that have circulated for the twenty years since the fall of the Soviet empire made them available, has been fraught with risk. Any historian or scientist who has suggested lesser figures has been variously accused of wishing to lessen the crime or even to deny the Holocaust. Art which becomes frozen by the fear of offending, of leaving the safety of the liberal consensus, relinquishes the possibility of making any lasting, sustainable contribution.

‘It is not my memory of it,’ does not question the price of inactivity, but relies on assumptions where the starting point is the deciphering of the visual signifiers. That artist and viewer are experiencing a shared message is a groundless expectation. However, this is not an altogether unreasonable assumption, given that work of this nature is so uncritically received, Salcedo’s ‘Shibboleth’ being a case in point.
Meltzer and Thorne's piece is documentary dressed as politically responsive art. It is part of an endemic genre that frames the political, as opposed to addressing it. To address it would risk the kind of scrutiny which might expose the artist for what they are, or what their instinctive moral compasses might make them. To put forward an unpopular counter view would cost them where it most hurts, in exposure and hence profile. They would also come to be regarded as representing a specific campaign, even if the work was sufficiently oblique to simply be asking difficult questions as opposed to answering them. They would become alienated from an audience which is only willing to address the beastliness of what is, and not to enter into any kind of dialogue about what could or should be. Such elucidation risks for the artist the kind of personal confrontation which is no longer in vogue. Artists in the west rarely risk even their reputations, let alone their safety.

Meltzer and Thorne's narrative surrounding the killing of Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi is a postulated assertion which chooses to avoid difficult notions. The closest their piece comes to a hypothesis is that the assassination was a bad thing. It is useful to consider this supposition in the context of President Gerald Ford's 1976 executive order 11905 that stated "no employee of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassinations," later updated by Jimmy Carter in 1978 and then later by Ronald Regan in 1981, but which remains largely intact. The minor changes relate to the classification of circumstances and of the specific status of individuals in the wake of September the 11th. The focus is on whether it would prohibit the United States from responding to the attacks by targeting those who they believed had orchestrated them. The 'Congressional Research Service' report for Congress on the assassination ban was updated on January the 4th, 2002, ten months before the CIA assassinated al-Harethi. The
updated version is based on an intelligence ‘finding,’ signed by George W Bush immediately after 9:11, instructing the CIA to engage in ‘lethal covert operations’ to destroy Osama bin Laden and the Al Queda organisation. CIA lawyers found that the ban on political assassination did not apply to war time. Problematically, as has been witnessed in Northern Ireland, what constitutes a war, varies depending on political expediency as well as on who has declared it. Nevertheless, President Obama has proved to be a spirited enthusiast of targeted assassination increasing the use of unmanned drone attacks, particularly in Pakistan.

It is unlikely that Meltzer and Thorne are making the case for a position of passivism since such a position would require them to adopt a conviction stance which runs counter to their adopted constituency. The notion that they are simply documenting intrigue is made improbable by their inclusion in ‘Transmission Interrupted.’ What in fact Meltzer and Thom are attempting to do is to suggest that horrific things are sometimes done for good reasons, except they omitted the ‘for good reasons’ section. Unmanned drones are primarily used in an attempt to limit civilian casualties. And so if we reach the position of accepting that the death of al-Harethi was a ‘good thing,’ the logical extreme of this assertion is not a denial of history, but the seemingly illiberal concept that there is such a thing as a ‘good war.’

And if there is such a thing as a ‘good war,’ the implication is that the slaughter of innocent non-combatants is a price worth paying for pluralist objectives. But unless one has an unshakable belief in the continued existence of the soul, the imposition of sacrifice, which is a key component of armed conflict, is morally abhorrent, as well as an inconvenience to the faithful. And so in the ‘good war’ scenario, those who advocate doing nothing, allowing events to take their course as happened in Rwanda, could be viewed as being beyond the ‘liberal’ pale, being hog-tied by
antiquated concepts of national and religious identity, balking at the use of their national treasure, to which they have had the good fortune to be sufficiently affluent to have contributed. And those who advocate military action in the 'good war' scenario but who are squeamish at the thought of targeted political or even theocratic assassination, condemn the conscripted majority to bear the brunt of their chivalry. Such notions are unwelcome in art galleries partly because the notion of liberal intervention is so mistrusted. But primarily because art being allowed to ask seemingly weighty questions without offering answers has become the tradition. This has led to a formula of repetition, where art hides behind the licence to punch above its contextual weight. In the 'good war' hypothesis, which in itself is an answer, albeit a questionable one, there must be trust, or even faith, in those elected to carry out the will of the majority of the people. When it appears that information may have been manipulated or exploited and the trust is called into question, art that exposes this must be unequivocal and willing to be impolite. The questions cannot be academic.

The constitutional basis behind the B B C is a royal charter, which sets out the public purposes of the corporation and which is intended above all to guarantee its independence. The charter decrees that the B B C's views must be entirely independent of any private or governmental influence, and requires it to be free from both political and commercial influence and answerable only to its viewers and listeners. Given its scale and prolific output, the B B C being the largest broadcaster in the world, by and large it has kept to its mandate. And when it has strayed, or when inevitable accusations of bias have risen to a clamour, it has often been the B B C which has reported on the controversy. Indeed accusations that the corporation
was involved in the 1953 Ajax Operation, where it is claimed that the word ‘exactly’
was inserted into a midnight time check as a secret signal to the Shah of Iran that
Britain supported his plans for a coup, were originally made in a B B C Radio 4
documentary in 2005. The B B C has come to be viewed as a trusted institution of a
citizen state, a custodian of fact and an establishment for the distribution of actuality
rather than the voice ‘of’ the establishment. And so when false or misleading news
coverage is broadcast, as was the case when it reported from the Orgreave coking
plant in South Yorkshire on the 13th June 1994, the effects can have monumental
social implications.

During clashes between riot police and picketing miners from The National Union of
Mineworkers, witnesses saw police bludgeoning unarmed strikers unconscious as
they lay on the ground. But B B C footage shown on the evening news that evening
was spliced to reverse the events. Images showed miners advancing toward police
lines when in fact the fluid uncut version shows police descending on a stationary
line of miners. It was the fledgling Channel 4 news that asked the difficult questions.
Peter Sissons asked the Chief Constable of South Yorkshire “Do policemen
truncheoning miners to the ground risk disciplinary proceedings,” to which there was
no reply. And it was Channel 4 who would eventually broadcast Ken Loach’s 1984
Film, ‘Which side Are You on,’ which challenged the media bias. The B B C
consistently portrayed the striking miners as thugs and mobsters, as the enemy
within. A staple of their regular disinformation was the ‘drift back to work,’ which was
based on figures obtained directly from the National Coal Board, with no verification,
and which included managers and other staff not affected by the strike. They also
used a system of double counting.
In 2001 Jeremy Deller made 'The Battle of Orgreave,' a site specific art performance which re-enacted the clashes and which was part of Deller's Turner Prize winning submission in 2004. 'The Battle of Orgreave' may be viewed as part of a broader and emerging movement within contemporary practice, a characteristic termed by Nicolas Bourriaud as 'relational aesthetics.' Work which charts the intersection of aesthetics and creative control, where its theorization compresses the social context of human interactions. And being part of a new wave of performance-led works, Deller's piece, which is multi layered in its conceptual delivery, jabs at notions of heritage entertainment and the implication for cultural as well as historical interpretation while exploring issues surrounding authorship and the role of the artist in community based art projects, an area in which Deller has worked consistently. And it is this continued involvement in community which makes Deller's piece so confrontational and so successful as a piece of activist art. In 2001 there was nothing Deller could do to activate a reversal of the devastation that had been wrought on the mining communities. But the B.B.C.'s slicing and broadcasting of the footage has becomes an iconic insult to those communities, and I would suggest is even more significant than the destruction of the coal industry, to which it contributed. And if we view it in the context of George Orwell's assertion that, "those who control the present control the past and those who control the past control the future," it is an event, like the events surrounding the attack on Colombia's supreme court, that requires continued exposure. And the potential for well aimed, articulate and inclusive projects like, 'The Battle of Orgreave' is that they can help stave off such conditions and events. Being screened on Channel 4 television in October 2002, Deller's piece secured a far wider audience than it would have done had it been viewed in a traditional art space, or shown specifically to a traditional art audience. If
we remove 'The Battle of Orgreave' from the Relational Aesthetics
compartmentalisation, and simply view it as a piece of art which aims to right a
wrong through the perpetuation of memory, it can be viewed, Like Denes’
‘Wheatfield’ as a work impressively ‘fit for purpose.’ Only a vast bronze model of the
battle, in the style of Rodin’s ‘Burghers of Calais,’ 1889, and sited fluidly between
Parliament and Broadcasting house might have made a more commemorative
practical warning. And although this might seem a whimsical thought, artists are
constantly faced with a barrage of pragmatic considerations that are not simply to do
with money. It is one thing to critique. A television programme may have an
immediate impact and teach a new generation what to look out for in the future, but
in the same way that today’s news is tomorrow’s chip paper, truculent, immovable
sculptures have a tendency to rub people up the wrong way, largely through
repetition. A television documentary extolling the indiscriminate bombing policies on
German cities could be seen as insensitive and inflamatory. But the statue of Sir
Arthur ‘bomber’ Harris outside St Clement Dane’s RAF church in London acts as a
dynamic and unremitting sore to those who reject the rehabilitation of Bomber
Command’s reputation.

‘It is not my memory of it,’ is significant and worth analysis not only because it is
emblematic of a ubiquitous and malignant genre of ersatz activism, but because its
contextual reach cruises close to the crux of the debate over how we navigate what
we have come to understand as ‘democracy.’ This is at a time when cheap and
largely unrestricted information has become allied with theocratic and kleptocratic
governance, as designed and then disowned by the West, not before having become
popular archetypes. How is art to reconfigure itself in an age when the first
American Marines to land on the beaches of Mogadishu are met with the arc lights of
their own national television stations? When the CIA film themselves effecting targeted assassinations as in the case of Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi, and the torturers of Abu Graib release their own photographic document of events? And if these extremes create an environment where the enforcement of the liberal values of respect and acceptance of behaviour or opinions different from one's own, comes to be viewed as 'illiberal,' then a rich vein of urgent exploration exposes the need for an art that is fit for purpose. These are the dilemmas, the moral quandaries and the obvious complexities and contradictions that this reconfiguration must assault. The extreme difficulties inherent in proposing an art which examines these uncertain moral anxieties, with all the potential pit-falls apparent, leads to the pervasive genre to which Meltzer and Thorne belong. While Deller's approach might not represent a solution, it does at least present a principled stance, even if this is secondary in its composition.

Meltzer and Thorne are describers of events and bypass the possibility of change in their efforts not to offend. This is at odds with the stated aims of the curator of 'Transmission Interrupted,' Suzanne Cotter, who uses phrases like "disrupt prevailing forms of registering and responding to the world," "free speech and democracy," and "universal values." What she is describing is work that is politically volatile, conceptually challenging and morally rumbustious. Cotter is at the very epicentre of a genre that claims too much for itself, just as Andreas Huyssen does for Salcedo. And a wider look at Meltzer and Thorne's practice reveals work that is courteous and foppish. They are represented by 'Steve Turner Contemporary' a private gallery on Wilshire boulevard, in Los Angeles, an address historically more attuned to the exorcising of disposable incomes and ostentatious acts of charitable
giving than the avant garde. A brief survey of the other twelve artists in Turner's stable reveals a muster of fashionable 'art fair' chic.

In January 2009 Meltzer and Thorne, who have collaborated since 1999, exhibited two works at their gallery. 'Epic' (2007), and 'In Possession of a Picture'(2008). 'Epic' consists of five short films in which Rami Farah, a Syrian actor delivers monologues in Arabic with English subtitles. The text, written by Meltzer and Thorne, but with a considerable amount of leeway for improvisation from Farah, slips ruefully between his uncertain future in the Middle East, and absurdities reminiscent of Alfred Jarry's Ubu plays. "I am normal. I am human like everybody else. I am entitled to have my own jet. Maybe I will make a kite out of it, put some ribbons and some threads and fly it over Mt Kasiyoon. Maybe I will park it in front of my building."^ 'In Possession of a Picture,' is a series of 50 small digital photographs of locations across the United States where people have been arrested and or detained for taking photographs or videos. Next to the 50 frames are identical empty frames, reinforcing the facts of the confiscations.

Both pieces, 'Epic,' and 'In Possession of a Picture,' refer to the aftermath of 9:11. In Farah's case he alludes obliquely to nonsensical hierarchies and to a resignation of stagnant hope. The photographic series, 'In Possession of a Picture,' documents the enforcement of new security measures, but that is all. They do not critique individual instances or suggest that there has been a heavy-handed enforcement of them. Neither of these works voice any opposition or alternatives. They are simply reportage. Farah's assertion that he is a 'human like everybody else,'^ could have been a not-so-thinly veiled assault on the Western military alliance's propensity to give up counting collateral death tolls when they reach politically 'unacceptable' figures. But he redeems himself and re-establishes Meltzer and Thorn's
congregation through his longing for a personal jet. The jet puts the viewer at their ease, his feelings of dehumanisation were a joke after all, and no embarrassment was meant.

These two pieces, like 'It's not my memory of it,' appropriate politically-smelling imagery and exist to satisfy an audience that wants to feel the weight of intellectual engagement but which does not have the time, or the inclination to assess whether or not they have been engaged or just entertained. And this endemic type of art is so insidious because like mono-sodium glutamate, regular portions can fend off hunger indefinitely, and the fantasy that a meal has been devoured can become accepted as fact. And this leads to a dangerous assumption where the resultant malnutrition is exploited to suggest that a generalised and broadly coherent consultative process has been entered into and that the status quo has been reaffirmed legitimately. And in invoking instances or circumstances that can have no logical detractors, such as heightened security around potential terrorist targets post 9:11, measures which became popularly unpopular and continue to feed into an exasperated liberal world weariness, they distract from the complexities and contradictions that need to be discussed.

Michael Glover's assertion that 'Transmission Interrupted,' is ‘political art as it should be made, wheedlingly purposeful, skilful, quietly memorable,' mistakes the referencing of contemporary current affairs for didactic morally assertive art which attempts to use art as a tool for change. Polite comment and contextual chatter is not the same as engagement when one is assessing works which aim is to provoke betterment. But even 'comment' can be devoid in pieces that at first appear to be
seeped in activist fervour, Adel Abdessemed’s sculpture, ‘Practice Zero Tolerance,’ being a case in point. While it would be difficult to argue that this work is not spectacular, it does not claim any political ancestry, and does not touch any of the questions Bache claims for ‘Transmission Interrupted.’ The use of a weighted title suggests a bogus pedigree and only succeeds in creating meaning dislocation.

When it was exhibited at MIT’s List Visual Art Center between October 2008 and January 2009, Greg Cook made connections between Abdessemed’s Algerian background and the fact that the 2005 riots took place in the predominantly poor North African immigrant suburbs of Paris. But Cook also went on to claim that ‘it also suggests the wreckage of a car bomb.’\(^\text{11}\) And this dichotomy between artist intent, and viewer reference underscores the problems with works that can be open to a variety of interpretations, as I have explored in Salcedo’s practice.

I would suggest that contemporary artists would support the notion that there will be a divergent range of interpretive understanding of their work, and that some may go down perceptive paths that are far off the art works’ conceptual map. The role that the title plays in directing the audience should not be underestimated. Often it is all a non-traditional art audience has to go on. As I have examined in the practice of Doris Salcedo, poorly conceived titles can castrate meaning. Cook’s idea that ‘Practice Zero Tolerance,’ refers to car bombs takes it to a different continent and to an entirely different form of civil rather that military conflict. The fact that Abdessemed cast his piece by making a press mould from an actual vehicular victim of the riots is conceptually important in creating a real link with the events. It gives the viewer a tangible connectivity in the same way that we understand that a photographer’s eye has been there in real time, and that we are now offered the vicarious privilege of tracing their steps. Had Abdessemed called his sculpture, ‘Terracotta Car,’ he could
have addressed all of Bache’s questions, stating that certain sections of communities vent their anger and frustration by burning things, and that the husks contain a new order of visually urgent and contextually lucid results.

And in restructuring what constitutes a gaze worthy of aesthetic dialogue, if a shift in the ongoing conversation were to be taken seriously, it could ‘after our perceptions of the world around us.’ And rather than art serving ‘a purpose outside of the ornamental,’ the object, which in this case is ‘Practice Zero Tolerance,’ could have served to redefine the purpose of the ornamental. But by using Nicolas Sarkozy’s comments, made when he was the French Interior Minister and in response to the riots, as the basis for the title, Abdessemed runs the work aground leaving it static, and forcing interpretation to dance around a contextual sphere that is directorially insuccinct. To the viewer ill-versed in the popular quotes of the now French President, or ignorant of the conventional superficially tolerant values of the art world, (outside of major institutional patrons) the irony of ‘Practice Zero Tolerance’ could be missed. It could even be thought of as a call to arms, which would make it a decidedly more interesting intellectual proposition. Had Abdessemed’s car stuck to answering the questions, he still may not have had anything to say about ‘universal values’ or ‘free speech and democracy.’ But he may at least have contributed to the disruption of ‘prevailing forms of registering and responding to the world.’ And his reconstruction of form and reconfiguration of meaning would at least have added to the list of questions.

Xhafa’s ‘Elegant Sick Bus,’ like Dellers’s ‘Battle of Orgreave,’ conforms to a new performance aesthetic which has at its core a socially inclusive contextual treatment of the viewer whereby the artist facilitates the transfer of power to the audience.

The relationship between maker and looker is shifted in favour of action, but at the
directorial behest of the initiator, in this case Xhafa. But whereas Deller’s piece was
contemplating an historical aberration with a clearly refined accusatory finger, Xhafa’s
‘Elegant Sick Bus’ makes no more impressive commentary than on what he himself
describes as ‘the complexities of tourism and its economic phenomena.’\(^\text{14}\) It might
seem unfair to include Xhafa’s piece in a list of works of ersatz activism, because by
its very configuration it is responding to an in-house, theoretical artworld discourse.
The practical aim of its theoretical starting point, which it shares with Deller’s, makes
this piece a masterstroke of missed opportunities. Aside from making each of the
unemployed bus pushers £15 better off in return for their hour’s labour, ‘Elegant Sick
Bus’ achieved nothing other than a successful illustration of Bourriaud’s thesis on
relational Aesthetics. And while Bourriaud’s aim is not to formulate a new more
concise way of manufacturing pragmatic dissent, the fact that Deller was able to,
while staying within Bourriaud’s theoretical constraints, means that Xhafa’s
contribution falls outside of an activist definition. Xhafa could have attempted to
effect change without cutting off his theoretical apron strings.

Rakowit’s installation, ‘The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist,’ is an altogether more
complex work. Its title is sufficiently ambiguous to give the viewer the smell of the
work without grounding it in the way Abdessemed’s work became. It relies less on
unbridled spectacle that the others in Transmission Interrupted, attracting the viewer
through its skill and dexterity, as well as the humour contained within the narrative.
But again, this is a work primarily of commentary, a critique of the ransacking of
Baghdad in 2003 and the US administration’s attitude to the destruction of Iraqi
national heritage. This was typified by Donald Rumsfeld’s remarks that \emph{‘stuff
happens,’} and that \emph{‘freedom’s untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and
commit crimes and do bad things.’}\(^\text{15}\) ‘The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist,’
responds rather than directs. It is another visually elaborate document, albeit one
which may come to provide an incisive historical ledger of events. However the
reconstruction of missing artefacts through the use of rubbish is a further layering, an
implication of value discrepancy and heritage hierarchies within an imperial formula.
A formula that allows for ‘Stuff to happen.’ But as a central crux, this is too subtle a
critique to proffer a change in approach or understanding. It is this affability that
humbles this piece’s reception.

Based solely on the works she selected and commissioned for Transmission
Interrupted, the answer to Suzanne Cotter’s question, does art ‘have a function or is
it just something we look at and talk about? Or does it actually impact in some more
tangible way, in the way we think, feel and do things?’\textsuperscript{16} would have to be a
qualified, ‘a bit.’ And this only applies on the basis of prior, or contemporaneous
received supporting knowledge. However, Cotter does not make her own position
clear, preferring to talk obliquely about the function of art in relation to work being
produced now. If taken at face value and without background knowledge, this might
make any impassioned critique of the work overly cynical. But thematically, there is a
continuity which points to a position of political affiliation in the broadest sense. The
assembly of works that she has chosen constitutes a clearly aspirant motif, with the
banality and skittish character of the works represented being simply, but not
significantly, symptomatic of where activist art, or art that purports to be politically
motivated, is today. And this is not an accidental triangulation. The inclusion of
Jimmie Durham, an artist of an older generation and one resplendent in activist
livery, is significant in helping us to decide the intentions of Cotter’s composition.
Were it not for Durham, ‘Transmission Interrupted’ could be viewed as an appraisal
of a genre which is too secure in its own limitations, having borrowed from the most
strident of previous vernacular impositions and built its own ergonomic, diluted composite, one which allows for a maximised exposure through dynamic and belligerent inoffence. But Durham's reputation is such that his inclusion defines the other works in the exhibition, a feature of all group shows that carries with it its own set of pit-falls. And in as much that the raising of an argument or the illustration of a point can be made through such configurations, the curator's thumb print must be measured in terms of an astute consideration of all interpretive eventualities.

Durham's inclusion is a deliberate act of pedagogical certainty, and one which qualitatively undermines the rest of the work in the exhibition. This is not because Durham's contribution, 'Various Elements from the Actual World,' (2009), which is made up of five mixed media panels, is so much better. In terms of a generic contemporary visual offering, it is a weaker and altogether less exciting prospect than the works I have already discussed. It lacks his signature artistry and contextual nimbleness, resembling more a deferential re-enactment, a 'Deller on Durham.' But It represents the bestowal of pedigree on to an otherwise disjointed and imprecise exhibition. However the commandeering of activist blood-stock does not mitigate the failure of 'Transmission Interrupted' to represent the possibilities of any form of art practice that incites transformative thought. It is a highly non-representative exhibition which does not assuage its failures through the vagueness of its mission statements. But if one is to take a purist view of what representative obligations a show that purports to survey recent developments should aim to be exposing, 'Various Elements of the Actual World' is entirely appropriate. Much of Durham's recent three dimensional work is more urbane and less Machiavellian. An example of which is, 'Ghost in the Machine,' (2005)(fig 6.4) a life size cast of a statue of Athena which is tied with heavy rope to a refrigerator. Vivian Rehberg describes this work as
being 'surely about Cartesian mind-body dualism,' an astute although not obvious nor indisputable reading of the sculpture. And this late work falls into the same traps that I have discussed in relation to Salcedo’s practice. The ambiguity is too reliant on prior knowledge, what Rehberg calls, ‘too archaeological in nature, too much about origins and too playful.’

It is playfulness, which has always been a part of Durham’s work, that has helped its entry onto the contemporary circuit. Its lack of meaning insistence, its aesthetisation, confirms its right to belong, ‘Ghost in the Machine’ being the bastard son of Bill Woodrow for the Saatchi generation. Nevertheless, Durham’s use of humour has made him stand out. Regarded exclusively, but variously, as a Native American artist, a Cherokee writer, poet, performance artist as well as a treaty activist, making art that is funny might seem incongruous given the gravity of the themes he explores. But humour, as well as being an engagement device every way as legitimate as spectacle or visual deception, is also a manifestation of the very dexterity which can lead the viewer to the serious core of the subject in a way that a full frontal attack can often fail to do. Durham himself stated that ‘I am often put in the bag in which everything I make is expected to be, even ‘known’ to be, a metaphor for the plight of American Indians or even of ‘nature’ in general...when I often want to make only whimsy or mystery or beauty.’ But there is no evidence that any of Durham’s exhibited works are ‘pure’ whimsy. ‘Pocahontas’ Underwear,’(1985)(fig 7.4), for example, a pair of red feathered knickers, is heavily imbued with both irony and implication. Presenting them as residual museum fillers, illustrative of an ethically manageable, false legend that cites Native American assimilation into European society as painless and free from genocide. The knickers choreograph a
pantomime rape scene in which penetrative Christianity abuses as inventively as alcohol or modern gambling enterprises.

An assemblage which is emblematic of Durham's jocular poignancy is 'The Cathedral of St John the Divine,' (1989). Its main component is a moose skull painted black and blue and decorated with blue squiggles. It has only one antler, the other being replaced with a section of plumbing pipe, and it is mounted on an overly elaborate wooden structure made of rough hewn packing timber. Again this is a humorous piece, it is visually engaging and has a layer of meaning that is not too ambiguous, although it does rely in part on compatriot art works within its vicinity as well as Durham's specific ethnic profile in order to anchor its narrative. This piece examines the special connectivity that Native Americans are understood to have with the animal kingdom, viewing them as sentient beings with the ability to transform themselves between human and animal form. The use of an animal skull being what Lucy Lippard describes as being a 'metaphor both for the way society sees Native civilization-simultaneously buried and exposed.'

The title of the piece refers to the Gothic Cathedral in Manhattan which, unlike real Gothic structures, has steel reinforcing running through its stone bulk. This steel is now rusting and pushing against the stone, endangering the entire edifice. The irony of a counterfeit symbol of longevity and rigid sustainability failing so monumentally, is used by Durham to place the mythological panorama of native spiritual identification in the theme park of cultural abbreviation. This work both celebrates and ridicules the imagined portrait of the indigenous American, what Laura Mulvey calls 'the complete disjuncture between the Indian peoples' history in the nineteenth century and the fictions of the frontier.'
Like Boltanski, Durham refutes received history, but unlike Boltanski's broad theoretical thesis, Durham's rejection is thematically specific. His is a rejection which believes in history. And it is this overarching characteristic which distinguishes Durham from those artists who either exploit the seductive properties of historically melancholic imagery, as well as from those who siphon and adulterate the spectacle and venom of politically charged invective.

A criticism that could be levied against these works are that they are witty one liners, their layers remaining oblique, perhaps too 'buried.' But these works are seldom stand-alone pieces. The 1980's through to the early 1990's was Durham's most prolific, acerbic and articulate period. It was a time when he produced a vast quantity of assemblages which he exhibited en masse to create a collective language through a mix of shrewd aesthetic indifference with rabid political inquisition. The fusillade of skits which Mulvey suggests 'emphasises the reality of material rather than the realism of iconic appearance works against fetishistic belief.' And given what we are supposed to know about the Native American, this would seem a reluctantly iconoclastic approach, one which does not fit, just as the plumber's pipe does not fit the moose head. But it is Durham's non-European methodology and not his 'indianness' that makes his work from this period so vital and transgressive.

The connections between the often disparate objects that make up the assemblages are not logical in terms of linear associations, at least not within modernist orthodoxy. Durham's assertion that, 'Sometimes when you look at art, you're not really looking. Once you think you know what it is, you stop giving it attention,' is not his advocacy of another form of engagement device designed simply to keep the viewer guessing. Rather, the clashing of divergent meaning intimations creates tangentially discordant affiliations which far more authentically illustrate the human state of
consciousness. What Jean Fisher describes as, 'the uncharted and disturbing territory of the real.' This is where Durham's instruction enables him to make work that is overtly of and about issues surrounding his own political concerns but without rejecting the majority of his audience who might have little specific knowledge or understanding. The contextual vibrations and anxious parodies which circumvent these works, intercept an empathy based on experience and which is less to do with ethnic lineage, and more to do with a free association of chaotic parts, which itself only occasionally crystallise into something recognisably different. This difference becomes a similarity because it has been reached through a unifying recognition of chaos. And it is in the unanimity engendered during this negotiation through entropy, what Mulvey calls the 'displacements of meaning across words and things,' which enables Durham to twist metaphors without thematically disturbing the origin, or alienating the viewer. As Durham stated, 'I want people to be confused.'

In many ways Durham is the archetypal activist artist. He makes highly engaging work which sets out a clear campaigning agenda and he has manufactured a profile which enables him both creative liberty and career resilience. But what 'Modern Art Oxford' misunderstood when they sought to recruit activist nobility, was that the power of Durham's work lies in its chaos aesthetic as opposed to the clarity of its localised, albeit articulate political gaze. But this is understandable given that Durham has so far failed to fully exploit this most significant aspect of his practice. Had he done so he may have come close to creating an art where real, as well as imagined divisions would evaporate and the contradictory nature of human convictions would disfigure dogma and irrational certainty, an environment where the deconstruction of any tenet becomes normal practice and safety and convention is found in rational bewilderment. A clue to this ambition is Durham's statement, 'I
think the greatest evil of our time is belief. So I try and interrupt every piece. And it is at precisely this point in Durham’s career where a new lucid and more inclusively humanist form of activism that had the potential to enable change more sustainably, began to emerge. And for this reason it is understandable that Cotter would wish to buttress her fragile thesis by enrolling Durham. But none of the younger generation of artists in ‘Transmission interrupted’ have stooped to pick up the baton that Durham dropped in the 1990’s.
CHAPTER 4 NOTES


18. Ibid


25. The Pursuit of Happiness, Artist’s Film by Durham, J. (Art Views) 2003, 12 minutes.
Chapter 5 - Thomas Hirschhorn: The Look of an Activist Artist

In attempting to discover what constitutes an art practice that can be said to benefit the world which it inhabits, either by exposure of facts and realities, or by confrontation of the kind that leads to an appraisal of policies, the notion of artist as activist, or ‘activist artist’ is a phrase regularly used. In order to get closer to what is meant by this, I have made a brief examination of the work of the 51 year old Swiss born artist, Thomas Hirschhorn because his installations or ‘displays’ appear to have the kind of evangelical fervour that is designed to create debate and influence social and political change.

Hirschhorn’s work seems to contact an anxiety in his audience which could be seen as a prerequisite pending the need for re-evaluation through new knowledge and enlightened understanding. That he sites works in and around poor immigrant communities, that he makes graphic references to political, theoretical and philosophical thinkers, that he regularly uses disturbing and extreme images of violence and pornography, his use of cheep disposable low-value materials and his regular mimicry of corporate paraphernalia might at least superficially categorises him as an activist artist. But he leaves us hanging. He does not offer us any alternatives in the way an environmental activist might support their argument by a set of proposals facilitated through scientific choice. Hirschhorn stops short of answers. However this in itself can not disqualify him from categorisation as an ‘activist artist.’ If we are to use the term ‘activist’ with ‘artist’ it has to be an amalgam, and if we accept that the two professions are not mutually neutralising, then the seemingly direct and at times militant approach Hirschhorn appears to adopt could
be viewed as doing what activist art it is supposed to do, suggesting the pertinent questions that need answering, only more forcefully and more honestly. Were he to offer solutions he might rightly be accused of being a propagandist, as opposed to the environmentalist who is seen as a pragmatist. Science can cure in a way art can only diagnose.

In this, Hirschhorn is ultimately extremely precise, and atypically quite traditional. But the accuracy with which he exercises this convention often fails to engage as there is often a confusion of inference. This confusion is a by-product of his primary concern, which is for a kind of ‘super-reality,’ or a kind of experience that is more than art and more than memory. He is trying to make an art that is not about imagination, but is about the state of being. What it is to take on new knowledge without clearing out the old knowledge. He is not primarily concerned with changing the way people think. Although he is concerned with the way people learn to think. Hamza Walker describes Hirschhorn's 1999 work 'World Airport,' (fig 1.5) which I will examine later, as "a sad work, mourning the loss of intellectual and spiritual ideals that have nourished modern utopian thought."!

The 'more is more' aesthetic in Hirschhorn's work is illustrative of our inability to focus absolutely, given that our experience in life is panoptic. For instance, on being informed of the inevitability of a loved one's death, one might still notice the consultant's odd socks and smell the Lemon Geranium on his desk. Reality is totality. It is the entire conscious experience and not only the dominant or paramount part. The scent of Lemon Geranium might become an important part of the residual understanding of the bereavement, the smell compounding with the medical micro management to create a Gestalt that is ultra authentic.
Hirschhorn draws on his own cerebral biographical impulses. His inclusion in many of his works of references to his own personal heroes reinforces the idea that these are works not just by him, but about him. He is often quoted as saying that he does not make political work, but that he makes work politically. This is usually taken to refer to the tape, cardboard and generally cheap or rubbish materials that he uses in his constructions being emblematic of the poor and the disenfranchised. This misses the point as these materials are just as prevalent in the homes and streets of more affluent communities. Hirschhorn's comment should more accurately be read as meaning that because his work is never divorced from his own reality, the reality being that he is a political person, the work will inevitably take on a political bearing. But it is precisely this biographical device that disorientates the viewer, blunts the specific concern or context of individual works, and at times, such as with 'Bataille Monument' (2002)(fig 2.5), which I will also examine later, fails to engage the communities within which the work has been sited.

This raises the question as to whether it really matters that some works, in trying to create the level of confusion which is analogous with the way we process information, do disorientate and disengage a wider public. And can we rightfully view Hirschhorn as an accidental activist? Is the happy accident that his views are not only politically correct, but that they catch the zeitgeist of popular concern over consumerism and globalisation, enough to dispel any criticism of self-indulgence? And does Hirschhorn's willingness to place himself so firmly within an historical tradition that not only seats him next to Rodchenko, but with Warhol and Beuys, mean that his dominant objective is to engage an internal dialogue only about the
nature of art? If so is he exploiting an activist art aesthetic in order to affirm his place and his legacy in the art world and could this confirm his practice as being the antithesis of activist art?

In order to explore these questions I will consider three works by Hirschhorn. Firstly, 'World Airport' (1999) as it is a perspicuous example of his early displays and it demonstrates clearly his own unique syntax.

Secondly, ‘Bataille Monument’ (2002) which was an eight-part monument to Georges Bataille constructed in a low-income immigrant neighbourhood of Kassel and which demonstrates Hirschhorn’s use of personal iconography as well as issues surrounding viewer engagement.

Thirdly, ‘Superficial Engagement’(2006)(fig 3.5) is a work that is most clearly approached as a work of protest. It has all the archetypal Hirschhorn chattels of which ‘Bataille Monument’ and ‘World Airport’ demonstrate, but with a visual force that both distorts the way it might be assessed in terms of it categorisation, and which invites a kind of superficial criticism that exposes most clearly the compartmentalisation in his work as well as the weaknesses in his judgement.

None of Hirschhorn’s works to date divert from the elementary constituents that are found in the composition of ‘Superficial Engagement,’ ‘World Airport,’ and ‘Bataille Monument.’ All three have three distinct but interlocking and mutually supportive missions.

The first is to establish and to stabilise the work within the context of the art world and to secure Hirschhorn’s accurate placement within it. This feature absorbs his
frequent references to other artists as well as to intellectuals, philosophers and mystics. His determining pursuit of a realistic way to illustrate the actual way the world is perceived, sits within this area as it places him both contemporaneously and historically amongst those who have attempted to demonstrate the mechanisms by which existence might best be navigated.

Benjamin Buchloh describes Hirschhorn as having, “positioned himself more explicitly than any artist of his generation (or that of his predecessors) within historical constellations.”

Kurt Schwitters and Aleksandr Rodchenko are frequently cited contextual anchors who seen together, offer a heterogeneously vexed account of Hirschhorn's imports.

Schwitters' passivity could be seen as equating to the nonchalance by which Hirschhorn approaches the question of responsibility, what might be seen as Hirschhorn's belligerent refusal to accept overt social or political engagement, while at the same time acknowledging change and opportunity.

Rodchenko's influence might seem to lie peripherally in the fact that he did engage socially and politically, and his design background mirrors that of Hirschhorn who was trained as a graphic designer. But the more likely influence Hirschhorn draws is from the intent, and the delivery of Rodchenko's photography. Through the variance of camera angles and repeated compositions, the delayed recognition he elicits can be seen as a device to find a new kind of reality. One might argue that Rodchenko and Hirschhorn are both social realists, both trying to find a way of illustrating super-reality, albeit for different reasons and toward different outcomes.
The more contemporaneous, and more regularly identified concurrence places Hirschhorn as the natural descendant of Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys.

Warhol’s influence is not only in the satirical derailment of brands and logos, but in the bemused distance with which he viewed his own involvement with celebrity, and with its value. One might interchange Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe for Hirschhorn’s use of Antonio Gramsci or Georges Bataille. All are simply heroes to be used metaphorically rather than didactically. But it is the lineage that has been bestowed upon Warhol that is where Hirschhorn rests his gaze.

By making overt, as well as implicit references to Vladimir Tatlin, Piet Mondrian, Otto Freundlich as well as to Barnett Newman and Blinky Palermo, Hirschhorn seats himself at the natural junction of spacial abstraction and design primacy. What Buchloh describes as, “the articulation of that perpetual oscillation between an irretrievably lost plasticity and the inescapable semiology of visual production.” Hirschhorn’s assimilation of abstraction is preserved in his disengagement. His assimilation of semiotics is in what David Cohen regards as his “adolescent crapfest.” His illustration of super-reality lies in the chaos of the seemingly random affiliations that the “crapfest” exploits.

Hirschhorn’s detournement can be seen as analogous to Beuys’ resanctioning of objects if seen in the light of Buchloh’s reading of Beuys’ shamanist claims as, “simple minded utopian drivel.” This is a critique not dissimilar to Cohen’s approach to ‘Superficial Engagement’ as “a puerile addiction to the macabre and scatological.” However, when interviewing Hirschhorn twenty-five years later, Hirschhorn makes the claim to Buchloh, (a Hirschhorn loyalist), that Beuys, through his use of materials “revolutionised the idea of sculpture,” and goes on to say that
he takes Beuys' shamanism "seriously as a form of expression." But when Buchloh notes that he does not adopt the role as shaman himself, Hirschhorn replies in the negative, but says that he finds it, "highly interesting as an artistic tactic." That Hirschhorn views Bueys' shamanism, which is surely as identifiable a trade mark as his own excess of tape and clutter, as a ploy, suggests that subtle strategies are in place within his own practice. If Hirschhorn is to be surveyed as an activist artist, then any strategy should be seen as legitimate, exposure being the fuel by which change is effected. But if we do not view Hirschhorn as an activist artist, then his concern with his own place within the art world must be approached more cynically. Nevertheless, his admission into this world should not be viewed as his primary objective.

The extent to which Hirschhorn believes that it is possible to navigate a course that negotiates the terms and conditions of existence through the embrace of chaos and contradiction is evidenced by the second device. This is the area in which he allows his own personal views to manipulate the shape of his displays. This is where the seemingly random references come from. They are to all intents and purposes, the random thoughts of the artist. That the artist has random political thoughts, because he is a politicised individual, makes the work seem superficially political. But this is actually the area that distributes the disorder that Hirschhorn identifies as governing all perception and all memory.

The third is the spectacle, rubbish and valueless clutter made into apparently random form squeezed into highbrow New York galleries or left to decompose on the
streets, combined with often complex and ambitious technical constructions. This creates an environment where a level of captivation is almost guaranteed. Add to this humour and satire and the mesmerizing incongruity of images of extreme violence or pornography, and the stage is set. The spectacle becomes the sheep's clothing under which the first two elements get to work. The manner by which Hirschhorn's sculptures work, and how they might be categorised is dependent on the balance of these three important, and constant elements.

'World Airport' was created for the 1999 Venice Biennale and is made of wood, cardboard, paper, aluminium foil, tape, neon lights, toys, chairs, photocopies and all compiled with Hirschhorn's trade-mark frantic, unfinished look. Central to the work is a long elevated runway on which is a rank of clumsily made model aircraft, all in the livery of specific national airlines. Overseeing them is a large control tower. All this is surrounded by crudely made objects such as giant spoons and branded trainers as well as images of showroom cars and lighting trellises which illuminate rows of seemingly random corporate management charts. There is a seating, or waiting area where piles of texts have been placed for the viewer to take away and read. The texts are short essays by Alison Gingeras, Manuel Joseph, Stephanie Moison and Marcus Steinweg whose brief was to set out their personal positions on this work. Parallel to the runway are booths which contain images and texts referring to recent regional and ethnic wars as well as altars to Reebok, Nike, Adidas, Puma as well as to Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, Antonio Gramsci and Baruch Spinoza. Tendrils, or what Hirschhorn calls, 'ramifications' of cellophane and rope link the disparate areas together forming a web of association both literally and metaphorically. But there is no dominant element, there is no hierarchy of information. Each section can
be seen separately, although the weight of evocation changes with each
neighbouring contrivance. But there is no convergence and no blending of the
edges. The partitions and altars reinforce separateness, but the 'ramifications' imply
dialogue and mutual recognition.

As with much of Hirschhorn's work, the interiors are left wide open for interpretation
and misunderstanding. But the exterior of 'World Airport,' its determining surface
concern, is for the liberal consensus that has filled the void left by the failure of the
Soviet system two decades ago. The marginalisation of critical dialogue and the
mute acceptance that a global capitalist system with its trickle-down economies will
rid the world of poverty and war is presented by Hirschhorn as ridding the world of
alternatives, of personal and national identity and of creating new tribes to have new
kinds of wars. The honourable search for a utopian system, of which both sides in
the cold war were searching, has given way to an easy overarching globalisation, a
place where national airliners that are no longer owned by the country whose flag
they endorse, carry the beneficiaries of the new wealth across counties and conflicts
of which they have no knowledge.

'World Airport' has a clarity of secondary concern. But the inclusion of altars to
Hirschhorn's heroes, Bataille, Deleuze, Gramsci and Spinoza lessen the precision of
perception because while the integrity of his biographical construct is reinforced,
their viewer becomes marginalised by their own lack of knowledge. Hirschhorn,
although superficially didactic, is actually quite the opposite. He is using the visual
language of instruction and revelation to describe his own intellectual journey. This is
regardless of how irrelevant or bewildering this might be for the viewer. But the
devices he uses are relevant to the understanding of where he has positioned himself in the esoteric continuum of the art world. We see this supported by his theoretical adherence to a Marxist philosophical and political overview.

Bataille, Deleuze, Gramsci and Spinoza are all illustrative of this, and Hirschhorn strings them together with 'ramifications' of mutual regard. Indeed Spinoza, the only one of the four that predates Marx, and whose pantheism can not only account for his own satirical worship, but also that of the gods of Reebok, Nike, Adidas and Puma, is approached by Hirschhorn from a twentieth-century Marxist perspective. But Deleuze allows Hirschhorn the licensed perspective of the artist. In the same way that the rhetorical limitations of an exclusively activist art are distinct from that of the conversations constructed by political activism, Deleuze distances the practice of philosophical scrutiny from the need to find universal principle. In doing so he points to a tradition that is more comparable to a visual, artistic activity and places Hirschhorn in a role closer to that of his heroes. It also contextualises the lengths to which he will go to demonstrate the breaking down of hierarchical, inanimate components. This is not only an apperceptive device, but a contiguous reworking of Deleuze who, like Gramsci before him was concerned for the destruction of traditional social hierarchies. Indeed Gramsci's concern that the manufacturing of a consensus culture by capitalist constructs, which he saw as running parallel to violence and political skulduggery as a way of maintaining control, is central to Hirschhorn's conceit. Bataille, like Deleuze recognises the inability of philosophy to make sense of experience. When he said, "I believe that the truth has only one face: that of a violent contradiction," Bataille was encouraging the heterogeneous
foundations of Hirschhorn's 'super reality.'

The Altars in Hirschhorn's 'World Airport' are a treasure trail of intellectual signposts meant for a minority of viewers. That 'World Airport' was originally conceived for the Venice Biennale might indicate that this minority is not insignificant. One might also argue that sufficient clues, albeit characteristically oblique, may deliver the viewer to Hirschhorn's place of realisation. But the scattering of giant foil spoons is an altogether more wilfully oblique inclusion.

Although they can easily be read as symbols of wealth and health, 'born with a silver spoon in the mouth' and the tradition of rubbing a silver spoon in the mouth of a sickly infant, Hirschhorn's derivation from Bertolt Brecht's statement "first we eat, then morals," is an intellectual indulgence. But it is not divisive in the sense that anyone suffers by their exclusion of understanding. But it points to a pattern of separation that splits Hirschhorn's audience between those that engage in the cerebral gymnastics, and those that immerse themselves in the spectacle.

It could be argued that in providing for the less affiliated viewer, Hirschhorn's work retains a level of integrity not often afforded by an avant-garde. However the spectacle is only a by-product of the super-reality, which is his ultimate goal. Spectacle in this context does not equate to self-indulgence. It is a necessary tool. Like social and political critique, spectacle is not simply secondary, but is a fortuitous result, ripe for exploitation. It is Hirschhorn's reality, his pseudo intellectuality, his political self that is on show. It is possible to view all Hirschhorn's installations and 'displays' as works of self-portraiture, illustrating his own particular confusion of brain impulses that he identifies as having irregular and largely unstructured form. Indeed Hirschhorn refers to them as the "Flake of consciousness," or a "slice of his mind."
This disarrangement of thought is the super reality that Hirschhorn attempts to recreate. It is the actual experience of existence that Bataille identifies as the innate limitation of philosophy's attempts to iron out discordant positions.

The structure that does exist in works like 'World Airport' is the structure of necessity, the structure that makes it art and not simply emblematic rubbish. And it is this necessity for structure that might at first appear to lie behind Hirschhorn's often made claim that he is a formalist. This claim might be treated as cynically as that of another of his natural licence donors, Edward Kienholz, who claimed to be a painter simply because he coated his sculptures in a thin finishing layer of resin. But Hirschhorn's 'formalist' credentials must be seen in the light of his Marxist pedigree. His excessive concern with technique, albeit a technique designed to illustrate his own political and spiritual essence, is at the expense of an overt defence of social values. This can be clearly seen in an examination of the 'Bataille Monument' which is both spectacle and gymnasium.

'Bataille Monument' was created for 'Documenta 11' in Kassel in 2002. The eight interconnecting parts that constitute the monument alight superficially on themes of capitalism and consumerism and included a television studio which broadcast on a Kassel public access channel, a snack bar, a website with continually updated images from inside the monument, a Georges Bataille library with books relating to all facets of Bataille's output. An exhibition surveying Bataille's wider contribution and a large sculpture made out of wood, plastic and tape. A shuttle service was created to ferry Documenta visitors to and from the housing estate and Hirschhorn paid local German-Turkish youths not only to build, but to manage the site for the hundred days of its existence.
The Bataille Monument is a three dimensional manifestation of Bataille’s understanding of philosophy’s inherent shortcomings. Again, Hirschhorn has illustrated the confusion that Bataille identified as representing the frontier of philosophy’s usefulness. A feral reality of awkwardness that reveals that certainty is inappropriate and deceptive. But Hirschhorn does deceive the viewer. The monument reads clearly as an interactive, activist public intervention challenging seemingly axiomatic notions of social positioning both within, and about marginal communities. Okwui Enwezor, the artistic director of Documenta 11 stated that his aims were “to probe the contemporary problematics and possibilities of art, politics and society.” Hirschhorn does all this, effecting solidarity, empathy and critique but as a secondary effect, a Trojan horse allowing exposure and recognition.

Writing in The Christian Monitor, Rhea Wessel describes the monument as being a place where “young people find expression for their ideas, have a new meeting point.” But for Hirschhorn functionality was not a consideration, saying of it, “each person can create their own function for the monument.”

It is this disengagement from the practicalities of local perception that highlights a problem in Hirschhorn’s work. His alliance with the anti-hierarchical positions of Deleuze, Bataille and Gramsci makes the fact that he directs his discourse predominantly toward those in and around the ‘art world,’ hierarchical, and so contradictory. And this is not the contradiction of super-reality, but the inevitable contradiction of a practice that is overly self-conscious.

Having described the monument’s misinterpretation as “an outmoded version of social activism,” Carlos Basualdo claims that “many aspects of the monument were conceived as part of a dialogue with other artists and intellectuals,” and goes on to
refer to the “subordinate role of the residents.” In reality however, Simon Sheikh reports in *Afterall* that only approximately “5% of the Documenta 11 audience went to see the ‘Bataille Monument.’”

If we take out any social or political activism which Basualdo considers “foreign to Hirschhorn’s goals,” and accept that that which does strike a chord of social engagement is only that which conforms to the biography in self-portraiture, we are left with the very traditional sculptural concern for volume, mass, viewer displacement and physical manipulation as well as simple technique and media dexterity. But it is also possible to identify reworked theories of art brut as well as his concerns for the role of the artist as shaman, mystic and showman. And one can also analyse Hirschhorn’s use of materials as being acts of solidarity, his ‘more is more’ aesthetic, a critique on over-production and material accumulation. And if by drawing attention to the tautology of waste and consumer onanism, a level of change is affected, then the superficiality of his secondary intent can be seen as having some value. Implicit in this acknowledgement of value is the idea that engagement in issues can be activated casually, fortuitously and even accidentally. But if it happens inadvertently, or in Hirschhorn’s case premeditatedly but not primarily, the audience, as in ‘World Airport’ is likely to be split by the hierarchy of recognition that comes from an ignorance of the language of art.

For the work to be categorised as activist, it must speak unambiguously and to as wide an audience as is possible. It should create a visual dialogue that does not rely on prior knowledge of themes or issues or of current visual fashions. While it should steer clear of offering alternatives or solutions for fear that it be dismissed and therefore disengaged as merely propaganda, it should not be so enigmatic that it
leaves the viewer uncertain as to the direction of the dialogue or of the issues being critiqued.

So even as secondary conceits, neither 'Bataille Monument' nor 'World Airport' can be viewed as works of activist art. And since the concerns exposed in his work are only there because they are part of the self-portrait, we must assume that were he to hold illiberal, unpalatable or controversial views that these would be manifest within the work. If this were the case Hirschhorn might be a more interesting, albeit a less well known artist. He would not only forfeit the expediency of uncritical liberal invitations, like Meltzer and Thorne, but he would be forced to make more principled choices regarding the perception of his affiliations. For example, there is little discomfort for Hirschhorn in being misconceived as principally a socio/politically motivated left wing artist. But if he was incorporating personal concerns about immigration or Islamic fundamentalism, he might be less inclined to allow himself to be positioned within a traditional political structure and more likely to make explicit his alliances. This would disallow the simulated chaotic ambiguity that he uses to explore super-reality. It is precisely because he does conform to a liberal consensus, albeit one which he successfully critiques in ‘World Airport,’ that he is able to impose his real investment.

Whether the success of Hirschhorn’s Trojan horse delivers him as the antithesis of an activist artist is best explored by examining ‘Superficial Engagement.’ This piece exposes his Liberal credentials and tests the engagement values of the gymnasium versus the spectacle.
'Superficial Engagement' was constructed in the Barbara Gladstone gallery in New York's Chelsea district. It consisted of Hirschhorn's usual over array of TVs, cryptic texts, mannequin parts, cardboard, power tools, string, tape as well as nail fetishes and a homage, or altar, to the Swiss artist/healer, Emma Kunz (fig 4.5).

Dominating the display are four platforms that support extremely graphic photographs of people who have been blown apart by bombs and bullets. The images have been roughly ripped from magazines or are poorly printed downloads from internet sites. It is these that make up by far the dominant cognisance within the gallery, which is of flesh or what Hirschhorn describes as bodies, "in abstraction."\(^{18}\)

The platforms entertain four structural paradigms, the monument, the museum, the mosque and the mortuary. References to modernist utopianism and primitive belief systems circumnavigate the images of carnage, which are linked by threads to Emma Kunz' geometric paintings in a futile attempt to heal. Hirschhorn describes this work as "an attempt to heal war and violence through art,"\(^{19}\) a clear reference to Beuys' championing of the power of a universal human creativity.

The Gladstone Gallery's press release has 'Superficial Engagement' as, "exploring the intersection of the destruction of war and the creation of art."\(^{20}\) Writing in the Village Voice, Jerry Saltz interprets the work and its title as “Americans only being superficially engaged psychologically in the carnage pictured."\(^{21}\) Hirschhorn however explains the title by saying "to go deep I must take the surface seriously."\(^{22}\)

These are all the intrigues that routinely follow Hirschhorn's work. But 'Superficial Engagement' is different from both 'World Airport' and 'Bataille Monument' because the spectacle is dominant and independent from both the art context and the self-portrait. The images are so powerful and so shocking that unlike the altars in 'World
Airport' or the distraction of the sighting of 'Bataille Monument,' elements like the Kunz homage become invisible. The chaos in the work is the chaos contained exclusively in the downloaded images. Even the pseudo nail fetishes that articulate the language of the suicide bomber fail to become either a distraction or a clarification.

The chaos engendered in 'Superficial Engagement' is not the device Hirschhorn uses in summoning super-reality. It is the unstructured cerebral jump-start that precedes the fight or flight instinct. 'Superficial Engagement' does not illustrate super-reality, rather it exaggerates it because the work produces a physical as well as an emotional reaction. This reaction, clear in the behaviour of the viewers, engages them almost exclusively. I witnessed people clearly distressed by what they were seeing. The pavement outside the Gladstone gallery was littered with people who were waiting for friends still in the gallery, but who were clearly unable to remain inside themselves.

It is unlikely that Hirschhorn would not have been aware that by showing this work in New York so shortly after the events of 9,11, he would tap into a collective neurosis that would be highly receptive to the notion of mutilated cadavers. However, the fact that all of the approximately 100 images of the dead and dying, appeared to be Arab, could be viewed to represent a perverse sensitivity to his environment. An audience in 2005 might not have been ready to view equally graphic images from the twin towers, or the Bali night club and Madrid Railway bombings. If this were the case it would conform to Hirschhorn's rejection of any hint of controversy within his work other that that which examines the nature and placement of the art object, of
authorship and of the dissemination of information. However it could be seen as his investment in the liberal consensus that fates him. The liberal view being that the war is a bad thing. 'Abstracted' white flesh might legitimise the 'abstraction' of brown flesh. Dead Americans might present the conflict as a necessary evil, a just cause.

Although Hirschhorn would have been acutely aware of New York's recent history, we do need to see the extreme images in 'Superficial Engagement' as a runaway train. Hirschhorn used them unsparingly amid his trademark mega clutter and may not have fully anticipated their resonance or impact. He may have expected that the viewer's reactions would be blunted by his usual web of visual connections and conceits. Jan Estep notes "One is more likely to shut down when overwhelmed as to rise up in anger and disgust." But the images Hirschhorn used in 'Superficial Engagement' became more than their original commission. Abstraction, or disengagement, was not possible in the wake of 9-11. The geography and the continued climate of fear created an environment where 'Superficial Engagement' would only be approached in the most simplistic context. Jerry Saltz defends Hirschhorn against David Cohen's criticisms of him being addicted to the, "macabre" and the "scatological" by pointing out that, "horrific images-from lynching pictures to gangland murders-have been seen and produced in America for more than a century." But Saltz misses the point. Cohen's comments need to be seen in the light of a post 9-11 assessment. Warhol's images to which Cohen partly alludes, were presented pre 9-11, and at a time when not only had the impenetrability of the United States been tested and found wanting, but before America had for the first time in its history, lost a war. Warhol's Disaster prints, such as 'White Burning Car' (1963)(fig 5.5) or 'Saturday Disaster' (1964)(fig 6.5) were produced at a time before
the war in Vietnam had become a national psychological chasm. Toward the end of
the decade when it was becoming clear that the United States was being drained,
divided, beaten, and humiliated, Warhol was producing ‘Cow Wallpaper’ (1966)(fig
7.5) and ‘Flowers’ (1967).

‘Superficial Engagement’ was made during a time of even more profound national
trauma than the immediate post Vietnam era, which is still an important political and
cultural reference point and which prior to 9-11 still influenced American foreign
policy. 9-11 was different in that for the most part it was unpredicted and
unprecedented and so there was no prior debate or preparation. In August 2006, six
months after ‘Superficial Engagement,’ a poll commissioned for CBS News and The
New York Times found that 60% of New Yorkers said that they would not be willing
to work on a high floor in a new building at the World Trade Center site which
reflected a similar number nationally who believed a new attack on the U S was
imminent. The poll noted that one person in five was less likely to attend large scale
events and one in four said that they were less likely to fly than before 9-11. This is
the landscape into which Hirschhorn attempted to use graphic images of mutilated
Arabs as a kind of abstract screen saver. A background that was intended to have
no more ideological meaning than his own vague and confused subconscious
anxiety.

‘Superficial Engagement’ is not an activist work even though it does engage. Its
engagement is only as an addition to the vibrations of a city still in shock. The
images only infuse a widely exposed riddle. Simply because it shares the language
of a social and even moral conundrum, Hirschhorn’s neutral intent is not lifted onto a

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higher ethical stage. 'Superficial Engagement' does not unwittingly bring anything new to the table.

Nevertheless, Hirschhorn's output to date, 'Superficial Engagement' looks and acts most like an unambiguous activist work. That it is not an activist work clearly means that Hirschhorn is not an activist artist. But because at times he would appear to use devices that could be considered the domain of the activist artist, does not mean that he is exploiting them cynically. He is not the antithesis of an activist artist because he uses these devices precisely because of who he is. In this sense it could be said that, he is what frightens him.

There is nothing villainous about Hirschhorn simply because he is so easily misconstrued as an activist artist. The confusions and contradictions that he manufactures in his displays all lie within safe liberal confines. It can also be said that he has already made a significant contribution to the notion of fine art being a concrete manifestation of a live and relevant philosophical dialogue. His own personal, albeit enigmatic social anxieties have stimulated proxy debate. Unlike Claus Oldenburg, who rose to prominence with what was clearly an activist work 'Lipstick (ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks,' (1969), but who then went on to make what Hilton Kramer describes as "a very large contribution" to "sculpture pollution," Hirschhorn's environmental impositions are transient and culturally fluid. And although he has never made an activist work, his portrait adds to a broader debate that might effect change in a slower, less demanding but more resilient way through the slow burn polemics of the victim rather than the witness/commentator.
Art works that are primarily, or singularly works of protest or activism often have a limited time value. They are often ‘one liners’ preaching ‘for’ the converted, emblems of a particular cause rather than engines of change. A comparison of Haacke’s ‘Freedom Is Now Simply Going To Be Sponsored Out Of Petty Cash,’ and Hirschhorn’s ‘World Airport,’ highlights this. Haacke’s piece is an audacious satirical forecast of the comfortable corporate homogenisation that was to replace the Cold War status-quo. Haacke’s could be seen as being the most critically resilient of the two, speaking to a broad constituency. It is an unambiguous work given the extraordinary political events of the time. It is epic in its delivery and even contains an art world ‘in joke’ by referencing the unrealised sculptural commission of 1953 ‘The unknown Political Prisoner.’ Its belligerent popular message satisfies a non art audience. But its life span is short as it would become just another sky line advertisement, this time advertising a counter view which itself would become quickly dulled through familiarity and the tiredness of its repeat punch line.

‘World Airport’ however is ambiguous, difficult and contradictory. But it carries the enigma of personal neurosis, its lack of clarity mirroring the human condition. Hirschhorn has applied layers of glaze that do not pursue absolutes collectively. While one can read his muted and often comic pronouncements as to how rubbish the modern world is, the complexities of light and shade manufacture subconscious connections that last far longer than the life of the display or installation itself.
Hirschhorn's work is likely to effect change more sustainably than that of the contemporary activist artist not simply because he does not use one liners, but because in converging old school super realism with the vexations of modern superficial culture, he connects with the viewer from under the radar of his mega clutter and creates a residue that affirms franchise and licence.
CHAPTER 5 NOTES


3. Ibid


5. Buchloh, B. 'The Twilight of the idol,' *Artforum*, vol 5 no18 Jan 1980 pp.24-43


8. Ibid


Chapter 6 - Edward Kienholz: Nearly Great

It is not always important to survey an artist's background in order to understand their practice, save for some rudimentary contextualising dates and geographical facts. But in the case of Edward Kienholz, his background and early career offer an essential route in a reappraisal of his contribution. His formative confrontations which 'activated' his engagement provided a continuity of purpose, and the inceptive determinate that gave rise to this idiom was contained within the art world itself. It was those who sought to censor, to impose taste, to design restrictive practices and to sabotage the fluidity of expressive thought and dialogue, on to which Kienholz turned his attention. The work that came out of this struggle, which can rightly be said to be art about art, such as 'Back Seat Dodge 38,' (1964)( fig 1.6), 'The Concept Tableaux,' 'Watercolours' 'The Art Show' (1963-1977)(fig 2.6) and ‘Still Live’ (1974)(fig 3.6), are not Kienholz's best works. The inverted nature of their gaze dilutes their strategic value. But the 'art conflict' of which he was a veteran and which I will examine later in this chapter, gave rise to a three-dimensional verbalisation that became so articulate and precise when he was critiquing territory with which he was familiar, that when he cast his net wider into less charted waters, he retained the confidence and impudence that is manifest in more broadly significant works like ‘The Illegal Operation’ (1962) and ‘The Portable War Memorial’ (1968)(fig 4.6), both of which were concerned with more inclusive truths beyond just the art world. If it was not for his early experiences fighting a rear guard action, these works would not speak as loudly, as broadly or as coherently. And Kienholz recognised that in order to get a point across to as wide an audience as possible, any method was acceptable, and this came from his early experiences of using guerrilla tactics in his
conflicts with the wrecking balls of municipal and institutional authorities. But the visual language that was born out of these struggles, and which became so well honed, and which offered him global success and recognition, is what ultimately denied him the lightness of touch that was to stop him ever producing a work of real greatness.

The most common misconception about Kienholz, and one which distorts his legacy is that he was an inside, outsider. That although he was critically acclaimed both nationally and internationally, and after his controversial 1966 solo show at the Los Angeles County Museum, a celebrity, that he was outside of the fray, intellectually unaware and voluntarily exiled from the very art world at which he continued to snipe. In fact quite the opposite is the case. Kienholz rode shotgun, patrolling the borders of a creative frontier that was plagued by hypocritical notions of taste and decency as well as by cycles of political interference. The fact that Kienholz also made work that does not do this, which are quieter, more personal ponderences or aesthetic responses to his own changing geopolitical circumstances, only adds to the breadth of his critical vocabulary. These works are not lesser pieces; they are simply not activist works. And so it is not my intention in this chapter to focus on parts of his practice that miss or skim an 'activist' definition because his dominant language is that of political, moral and empathetic motivation. He is an activist artist who also makes work that is not activistic, as opposed to a mainstream contemporary artist like Doris Salcedo, who occasionally offers work that does work activistically.
Kienholz was born and raised on a farm in Fairfield in Washington State in 1927, a town which even today only has a population of 494. He took the logical geographical step of any young man seeking to broaden their horizons and in 1953 moved to Los Angeles. There are no accounts of anything in his childhood or early years in Washington that could be viewed as determinators or indicators of the career that was to come. The fact that some of his early experiences in both work and play eventually found their way into his tableaux is of interest although not significant. For example, 'State Hospital' (1966)(fig 5.6), can be read as having been drawn from his experiences working as a psychiatric nurse. 'Five Car Stud' (1969-72)(fig 6.6), as well as a number of assemblages that feature automobile components would have been facilitated by his time spent as a dealer in foreign cars, and 'Roxys' (1961)(fig 7.6), a reconfiguration of a Las Vegas brothel, from his own visits to a local brothel. But no specific episode or series of events can be identified as having led to his uniquely empathetic and abrasive practice. So in attempting to resolve the issue of how Kienholz became Kienholz, it is a more valuable exercise to look at what his options were.

Kienholz is often cited as having been impressed by the carved low relief stop-action narrative tableaux that hung in meeting halls and churches in and around Fairfield. Indeed this sparsely populated rural corner of the North West should not be viewed as having ever imposed any creative restrictions on Kienholz given that he moved back from Los Angeles in 1973 making a home just across the Idaho boarder in Hope, less than a hundred miles from Fairfield. And some biographical accounts claim that he was producing paintings prior to 1953 although there is no evidence to support this. However it does seem likely that when he set out for Los Angeles, he
already knew that his future lay within some area of the visual arts. That his initial steps were into the management of galleries is more to do with his recent experience managing local Washington dance bands than any desire to take a bureaucratic or purely curatorial role. At a time when he had little creative direction of his own, exploitation of his own organisational and persuasive skills allowed him sufficient distance to assess his new environment. And it is these skills that he was able to use to great effect throughout his career. So just as young artists converged on Paris in the early part of the twentieth century, as they do now on London, Kienholz's immediate geographical options were either the conurbations of California, or the established art hub of New York.

New York's status as the world capital of modern art was by this time unquestioned. The influx of refugee artists during the War had bestowed its status by proxy, and then the Abstract Expressionists had secured confidence for the title by design. The fact that Kienholz chose California over New York, and Los Angeles over San Francisco are indicative of his emergent, if rather loose and ill-defined political affiliations.

Like Brancusi fifty years previously, Kienholz manipulated his image as the uneducated backwoodsman. But unlike Brancusi, Kienholz only had to exaggerate traits that were already part of his persona. Just as the Irishman in New York becomes more Irish, Kienholz became more cowboy. He told me in 1987 that during the 1960's he would regularly be stopped by police for exercising his constitutional right to bear arms, his habit of wearing a pearl-handled revolver on his hip representing the satirical confluence of political critique and personal caricature.¹
The idea of Kienholz jostling for the affections of Peggy Guggenheim during private viewings on Madison Avenue or any of the 57th street galleries is improbable. The galleries on the lower east side, artist-run and collectively known as the Tenth Street Galleries might have accommodated Kienholz’s large personality, and the well publicised drunken antics in the Cedar Tavern by the abstract Expressionists would have suited his own propensities more than adequately. But even though the term Abstract Expressionist was describing a grouping of artists whose work differed markedly, their self-styled leader Willem De Kooning (in the very year of Kienholz’s departure from Washington) having produced ‘Woman V,’ a work which while expressionist, is far from abstract, they were still identifiably and indefatigably a club. Three years earlier in 1950 Life Magazine’s photograph entitled ‘The Irascible Eighteen’ gave faces to the club members, all of whom, with the exception of Theodoros Stamos, who was only five years older than Kienholz, were from a different generation. Even if Kienholz’s age, politics and broader preoccupations had been compatible, his relative lack of formal education aligned with the necessity for him to traverse salon politics, meant that New York did not represent a fruitful option for him. It was not that he did not like clubs; it was more the case that he wanted his own. In 1953 he was confident and ambitious and he already had a clear understanding of the world into which he was about to immerse himself. A photograph taken nine years later of the ‘Ferus Gallery Gang ‘in 1962, shows Kienholz flanked by John Altoon, Alan Light, Craig Kauffman, Ed Moses, Robert Irwin and Billy Al Bengston. This was Kienholz’s own club.

Kienholz found in California, an independence that did not rely on pre-established structures. Few of the commercial galleries that existed dealt in avant-garde works,
and those that did were based within the Bay area of San Francisco, and even those only dealt in derivations of well established genres. This meant that artists in Southern California had to rely on teaching to support themselves which meant that they were less restricted by commercial considerations and so more likely to be experimental and allow themselves to venture down creative blind alleys. In terms of the visual arts, Los Angeles at this time was a blank canvas, ready for someone to step into the fold. But the opportunity to become a big fish in a small pond does not entirely account for Kienholz's decision to settle in L A rather than in San Francisco.

In 1953 San Francisco had been an established centre for anti-traditionalism for over fifty years. The city’s North Beach area had been a magnet for the Avant-Garde since the start of the century. But its reputation as a hot bed of revolutionary fervour was distinctly political, and fluctuated around established traditions of orthodox radicalism. The 'Industrial Workers of the World' was an organisation which had its base in the city and which was made up of anarchists and socialists. By 1900 San Francisco had the most powerful labour movement in the U S which reached its zenith during the Great Strike of 1934. And during the Second World War half of all the U S detention camps set up to house conscientious objectors were located in the Bay area.

Southern California by comparison had largely been overlooked by the large Federal institutions and had been left to its own devices. It was less aggressively radical and more experimental. The picture commonly held today of speculative utopian communities and mystical new philosophical and social trials is more accurately representative of Los Angeles than San Francisco, at least before the popularisation and commercialisation of the counter culture of the 1960's
Los Angeles in the 1950's was a place manifestly more sympathetic to Kienholz's theatrical and self consciously eccentric approach. Living in Los Angeles allowed him the licence not to conform to nonconformist stereotype. He was able to move in circles that he found stimulating rather than simply fashionable at a time when cultural boundaries were being dismantled as overtly as social ones were being hastily reinforced.

Kienholz enjoyed the company of actors. He told me that 'The Beanery' (1965)(fig 8.6) which is a reconfiguration of the interior of a famous Hollywood drinking saloon where the faces of the inhabitants have been replaced with clock faces, was inspired during an afternoon spent drinking with his friend Burt Lancaster. So quiet was it that the ticking of the clock above the bar could be heard. A line of men leaning on the counter were transfixed by the sight of a beautiful woman across the lounge who was rolling a cocktail cherry around her mouth. When eventually she bit into it, the line, which included Kienholz and Lancaster, involuntarily doubled up as their lazy imaginations betrayed them.²

Apocryphal or not, this anecdote demonstrates not only the theatricality of Keinholz's approach, but also the level of melodrama which it is intended to invoke. And this represents a quite traditional narrative stagecraft that he would have been unlikely to have adopted were he working within the more radical dramaturgical environment of San Francisco. And this critically, controversial, yet fundamental element in much of Kienholz's work can be seen as running parallel with developments within the Hollywood film industry. For example his 1965 mixed media tableau, 'The Wait,' which comprises a skeletal figure sitting amongst an array of photographs which we are directed to believe is her long dead husband, is strikingly resonant of devices employed in Alfred Hitchcock's 1964 film, 'Marnie.' David Lynch's 1986 film 'Blue
Velvet' which is widely regarded as owing much to the Hitchcock oeuvre and which starred Keinholz's close friend Edward Hopper, had Kienholz's work fleetingly visible in some of the backgrounds. And as if to complete the circle, in Peter Plagen's 1974 book 'Sunshine Muse,' Hopper even appears in a list of Los Angeles assemblage artists working in the late 1950's.

The importance of Keinholz's decision to settle in Los Angeles should not be underestimated. He was an artist who responded articulately, authentically and absorbently to his environment. He did not simply make art in Los Angeles, but he made it as a result of Los Angeles. Likewise his work in Berlin of the mid to late 1970's, and in particular the 'Volksempfangers'(fig 9.6) is a later example of how responsive he was not only to his particular surroundings, but also how astute his personal critical decision making process was when deciphering influence and ordering appropriation from others working around him. And it was this early ability that meant that in 1957 when he opened the Ferus Gallery with Walter Hopps and Bob Alexander, his voyeuristic managerial responsibilities placed him in the perfect position to exploit the flux within an artistic community that at this time, still had no single continuous voice.

It was not until the following year, in 1958 that the pivotal exhibition 'Four Abstract Classicists' (Frederick Hammersley, John Mc Lauglin, Lorser Feitelson and Karl Benjamin) was staged at the Los Angeles County Museum. The show was then toured to Belfast and London in 1960 having been re-titled 'West Coast Hard Edge.' For Peter Plagen, this marked not only the genesis of the term 'Hard Edge' to describe what came to be called 'The L A Look' but also the moment when Los
Angeles became an "international success as a modern art center." But at the Ferus, Kienholz had the menu brought to him. The importance of the diversity of options that were presented to him should not be underestimated, either in terms of Kienholz’s career, or indeed for the wider development of the art scene of Los Angeles. One might say that the story of the Ferus, is the story of Los Angeles, and the story of Los Angeles is the narrative by which we understand Kienholz’s undervalued yet central place in it. And it is the circumstances that lay behind the ‘need’ for a Ferus Gallery in the late 1950’s that illustrates both the circumstantial and conscious decision making processes that converged to make Kienholz a maverick even amongst like minds.

The fact that Southern California was largely cut off from federal institutional interference until the huge expansion of military installations in the 1960’s, meant that local governance assumed the licence to reinvent itself through an almost continual cycle of political appraisal and realignment, albeit anchored to a fundamentally conservative armature. So in 1911 Los Angeles became one of the first cities in North America to establish a Municipal Art Commission. It took upon itself the overseeing of all elements of urban design aesthetics as well as the mounting of all civic art which it stated was to include “all paintings, murals, decorations, inscriptions, stained glass, statues, bas reliefs and other structures of a permanent character intended for ornament or commemoration.” Local art groups, made up of largely affluent white middle class conservatives were supportive of the Commission’s declaration as it fitted their aspirations of a new city immersed in a grand European style. But the depression of the 1930’s encouraged the establishment of a rich Mexican, Jewish and African American art scene that was
organic in nature and that reflected the experiences and aspirations of those who did not fit neatly into the local administration's vision for the city. However, keen to exploit this new resource and prove that they were responsive to the era's heightened level of ethnic fluidity and relatively relaxed cultural assimilation, the commission commissioned the Mexican painter David Siqueiros to produce a mural that celebrated the Mexican cultural identity of the city. But when Siqueiros produced a work illustrating the plight of migrant farm workers and forced repatriation, the mural was whitewashed and he was deported. In 1937 Siqueiro's assistant, Myer Schaffer had a mural he painted in a hospital depicting interracial relationships, (a theme that Kienholz was later to depict three dimensionally thirty-two years later in 'Five Car Stud,') whitewashed. These were not unique reactions, and the 'Jewish Community Press' kept a record of all art works that contained social content which were destroyed by the authorities.

By 1949 the Municipal Art Commission had appointed Kenneth Ross as its new director. Ross had not bought into the highbrow aesthetic dream of the cities founders. In 1951 his department announced a 'new approach,' and in October that year the first annual 'All City Outdoor Art Show' took place, a two week visual art festival held in ten public parks throughout the city which supported and exhibited art programmes as well as holding public lectures and painting and craft demonstrations. The festival reached all areas of the city including black and latino neighbourhoods as Ross encouraged as much participation as possible through the new medium of television broadcasts and radio transmissions.

Although the festival was a success, the sheer weight of letters of disapproval that the Los Angeles Times published led to Ross being summoned to the City council's chambers to answer accusations of a 'heavy Communist infiltration' in the festival. A
long campaign to undermine Ross ensued and after a series of censorship hearings he had his annual budget slashed from $40,000 in 1951 to just $5,400 in 1956, this at a time when the city’s increasing affluence had led to the opening of over 100 commercial galleries, mostly in the West Hollywood area.

It was amongst these commercial galleries that in 1956 Kienholz opened his avant-garde ‘Now Gallery,’ and it was here that Ross approached Kienholz asking for his practical and managerial support for the much depleted 1956 All City Outdoor Art Show. Exploiting the labour of his stable of ‘Now Gallery’ artists, Kienholz built the festival’s booths, marketed the event and most significantly, selected all of the nearly 1,800 artworks created by a thousand local artists.

Due to the censorship hearings, which mirrored the McCarthy witch-hunt, Ross would have become a high profile-figure within the political mêlée as the main point of the hearings was to publicly humiliate those being questioned. The media coverage across the city, with its conservative mainstream press was intense. Ross had a clear socio/political mission, and the fact that he entrusted Kienholz with the most fundamental elements of ‘his’ festival, at a time when both ‘Its,’ and ‘his’ future lay in the balance, suggests that Kienholz was already a highly sophisticated and significant political operator who had clear cultural insights that had been tried, tested and were trusted by Ross. Not the red-neck profile most usually attributed to Kienholz.

Kienholz made the 1956 festival a success. In the first two and a half days, 18,000 people visited and the event became an important springboard for Kienholz. As well as allowing him the opportunity to champion the work of young unknown artists.\(^5\) He
was also introduced to Walter Hopps, with whom the following year he cofounded the Ferus Gallery.

We can directly view the Ferus Gallery, and Kienholz’s wider success as well as his ultimate limitations, as having grown out of the attempts by the Los Angeles City authorities to eradicate an uncomfortable Avant-Garde through both the withdrawal of funds and the ignominy of public hearings. It was the backfiring of these efforts and the ensuing maelstrom on which Kienholz cut his teeth. And it was his absorption into a localised tradition of art resistance and direct activism that one must reflect upon when assessing his significant set of creative, rather than geographical options. But they were not simply about bucking trends and resisting censorship, which he did famously in 1964 when ‘Back Seat Dodge 36’ was threatened with removal from the Los Angeles County Museum. Kienholz had to decide what kind of aesthetic would be an appropriate vehicle for his further subversion. This may presume a cold contrivance on his behalf which should not negate our understanding of his early inclinations during his formative years in Washington. But it was the political struggles within the cultural landscape of Los Angeles and the traditions that this unique set of circumstances created, that led to it becoming North American’s second art hub, and not the emergence of ‘Hard Edge’ which Plagen describes fantastically as having arisen out of “Los Angeles’s desert air, youthful cleanliness, spacial expanse, architectural tradition and most vaguely and most importantly, out of optimism.”

In reality, what did arise out of the political squalor of the racial, cultural and class discrimination as practised by the city authorities, was a desire by Kienholz to find a direct and equally confrontational language of visual engagement, one which was unique to his circumstances. It is this fact, that his solutions had to be bespoke
solutions, that makes Kienholz so important when examining activist applications. He demonstrates how meticulously machined any approach needs to be in order to speak both broadly, and intimately, dogmatically yet conversationally. Kienholz’s solutions were Los Angeles solutions. The fact that Kienholz’s reputation grew incrementally with the growth and importance of Los Angeles as an economic and cultural trail blazer is no coincidence. As the dominant hub for the production of television programmes, it became fashionable to ape the life style manifestations of the city's characteristics as every inch of its evolving social malfunctions were played out in sitting rooms across the globe. And so Kienholz’s specific vernacular responses became more relevant, more recognisable and more widely applicable.

To understand the options, or solutions available to Kienholz during his Ferus days, a time when he managed the gallery by day, and worked in the studio at the back of the property by night, a brief survey of what passed through the exhibition space between 1957 and 1963 will help identify how his approach evolved.

No single style, concern or 'ism' dominated the Ferus. Even work that could be pigeon-holed still retained porous intellectual borders, with many of those who exhibited in this period going on to change their practice radically. Many of them became part of the 'Cool' semi technological look of simplistic form and minimal content that became so emblematic of 1960's Los Angeles art. However, the dominant stock in the 1957 Ferus soup was a late flowering of second generation Abstract Expressionist painting, West Coast style. The gallery’s inaugural exhibition showcased the work of six artists, five of whom, Frank Lobdel, Craig Kauffman, Richard Diebenkorn, John Altoon and Clyfford Still were producing Abstract
Expressionist works. Their kindred spirits, who later went on to solo at Ferus, were Ed Moses in 1958, Robert Irwin in 1959, and Larry Bell in 1962. Even though some of Kienholz’s very early work does witness the gestural exuberance and painterly melancholy of this kind of work, even a defiantly yet singularly academic subversion would have seemed a blunt instrument for a veteran of the recent cultural conflicts. Quite apart from the fact that Abstract Expressionism was already a spent force and fundamentally unsuited to the climate, space or traditions of Southern California, Kienholz was spoiling for a fight and Abstract Expressionism was the visual equivalent of sitting down and talking things through. It was too polite, too introverted and too exclusive. It represented the antithesis of the All City Outdoor Art Shows. Its only saving grace in terms of a West Coast political affiliation was that for many it was still the standard bearer for a dangerous avant-garde, even if it wasn’t.

An important but largely overlooked West Coast development that added to the Ferus mix was Funk art. Although it is most commonly viewed as a reaction against the non-objectivity of Abstract Expressionism, at its best, as with the work of Jay DeFeo, who was the sixth member of the inaugural Ferus show, it can bridge the artificial chasm between representation and abstraction more organically than De Kooning had done on the East Coast. Unlike De Kooning, there was never a hierarchy of materials, although clay came to be a signature medium. As well as DeFeo, the Ferus also showed Funk art by Wallace Berman in 1957, Billy Al Bengston in 1958, John Mason in 1959 (who blurred the same distinctions as DeFeo), Kenneth Price in 1960 and Llyn Foulkes in 1962. Funk art at its worst, which is the state it can most commonly be found, is trivial, whimsical, craft based and by modern standards, puerile. But its real significance resides in the period of its evolution that the Ferus documented, a time when a factional transition into
drawing (of a copulating couple) and demanding to know if “this” was what they were looking for. Writing in the American Quarterly Sarah Schrank suggests a “purposefully provocative encounter on part of the artists,” which seems likely since the vice squad had telephoned in advance suggesting that Berman remove his piece before they got there. What this demonstrates is that activism, as a part of an avant garde, had begun in earnest. But at this time instead of making work that overtly tackled specific social or political themes, the work itself was designed to provoke the issue that was standing in the way of a broader engagement, that of censorship itself. And the irony of Kienholz’s resignation from the Ferus in 1958 over its buy-out by the New York entrepreneur, Irving Blum, was that although the gallery became a more focused commercial vehicle, the wealth and the contacts that it generated meant that it could afford to take a far more forceful legal position with which to parry the scrutiny of the local authorities. This was a situation that served Kienholz well in 1962 when having retained strong links with gallery, he himself soloed at the ‘New’ Ferus presenting ‘Roxys’ for the first time. This show was able to go ahead unmauled.

But prior to this in 1960, Kienholz had made ‘Jane Doe’ a highly charged psychologically vexed portrait of ordinary domestic violence and victimhood, and the ‘Psycho Vendetta Case’ (fig 11.6) of the same year, was a wall mounted box assemblage that alluded to the wrongful conviction for murder of two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Known as the Sacco-Vanzetti case Kienholz employed a pun to rekindle the viewer’s memory of the injustice. When they were executed in 1927 there was a public outcry which Kienholz attempts to evoke in this sculpture. But this piece is about Caryl Chessman, a man sentenced to death in 1956 for sexual molestation. When the box is opened, the
backside of Chessman is revealed with his hands, which are behind his back, holding on to a tank periscope. Relying on human inquisitiveness, at the end of the periscope it says, ‘If you believe in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, stick your tongue out. Limit three times.’ As the viewer reads the instruction, they are directly aligned with Chessman’s anus. This work manipulates the viewer physically, emotionally and intellectually. As Robert L Pincus observes, “each voyeur must decide whether or not to perform the childish act of extending the tongue and thereby become a participant in the biblically rooted revenge of capital punishment.”

‘Roxy’s,’ two years later, consists of a series of individual figurative assemblages all of which represent different players in a bordello narrative, and all of which could be viewed independently without retracting the communal significance of their collective presence. And it is ‘presence’ rather than overt profundity that Kienholz constructs. Other than the fact that there is no wagging finger, this piece, like ‘Jane Doe,’ has no political intervention. Instead it is an essay on economic survival, fermented by suppression, and facilitated through oppression. It is a heavily laced critique on the mourning of irretrievable time and of the futility of attempting to re-establish and reconfigure that which has gone. And although the narrative is clear, the tension is more akin to a dentist’s waiting room than that of sexual apprehension.

These three pieces, ‘Jane Doe,’ ‘The Psycho-Vendetta Case’ and ‘Roxy’s’ all elicit empathetic connectivity from the viewer by presenting difficult sociological issues that require some level of internal debate. They all provoke principled responses regardless of how much direction Kienholz offers, and they all maintain the integrity of serious dialogue. And these are all made immediately prior to, but are significantly different to, ‘Back Seat Dodge,’ which was included in Kienholz’s solo show at the Los Angeles County Museum and which marks a more immediately
confrontational approach. This work is highly theatrical, consisting of an elongated 1938 Dodge, covered in blue flock. The door is wide open revealing a couple in sexual convulsions.

The controversy that followed has become part of the folk-law surrounding the censorship struggle within the Los Angeles area and has meant that even when Kienholz’s profile has been in danger of slipping into obscurity, ‘Back Seat Dodge,38’ is regularly reproduced in articles and publications that seek to examine the broader cultural health of not only the region, but the period. Robert Pincus describes the furore surrounding the show as reading, “like a neat parable of dual morality.”^9

Shortly before the show was due to open, two members of the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, Kenneth Hahn and Warren Dorn, after having visited the gallery began to pressure Edward Carter, the president of the board of trustees to close the exhibition, describing it as ‘pornographic in nature’ and ‘repugnant.’ The pressure they used was to threaten to withhold pay subsidies for museum personnel. Carter stood firm and eventually a compromise position was found. The doors to the Dodge were left shut, only to be opened at fifteen minute intervals by a gallery assistant. The narrative of ‘Back Seat Dodge 38’; which is that the most common early sexual encounters of his generation were had on the back seat of their fathers’ borrowed Dodge Saloon, is so simplistic that the only reason worth bringing this sculpture to realisation was to provoke exactly the reaction which it received. The fact that during their deliberations Kienholz secretly tape-recorded the County Board Supervisors making salacious comments indicates that this work represents a deliberate reignition of the censorship conflict. An attempt to remind the art world that the issue had not gone away and that artists were still working under unacceptable scrutiny. ‘Back Seat Dodge 38’ was a trap. It had no activistic function outside of art
and it sought no re-calibration of objectivity. It was art about art, about how art should be allowed to get on and do its job.

The cannibalistic and incestuous nature of art that speaks to and about art, is most usually the antithesis of activist work because the language is restrictive and its aims localised and inconsequential outside of an elite. But the work by Kienholz that falls into this category, like the ‘Concept Tableaux and Watercolour series’ of the late 1960's, ‘Still Live’ (1974) and ‘The Art Show’ (1963-1977), should be viewed in the same, albeit more refined light, as ‘Back Seat Dodge38.' They all assert the status, place and importance of an art that should be free from political, theoretical, emotional, material and fiscal obstruction. They issue licence for a compelling, egalitarian and socially utilitarian creative application.

The ‘Watercolours’ were simple framed sheets of paper on which ‘prices’ were hand painted by Kienholz. The prices were either in traditional currency, anything from $1 to $1000, or bartered through objects or consumables. For example one could own a ‘Watercolour’ by swapping an expensive Monte Factor designer suit for it, or a packet of Marlboro cigarettes. In this way Keinholz distorted traditional monetary values, and so at the height of his powers, it became possible to own a genuine ‘Kienholz’ for the change in your pocket. In satirising the seemingly arbitrary value of art and its subsequent inaccessibility, he derides the position in which he finds himself, a parody of the absurd circumstances by which Picasso, at his most despotic, was able to live for free when his authorising signature on personal cheques became more valuable than the amounts being tendered.
In the 'Concept Tableaux,' Kienholz had one eye on Bruce Nauman and the emergence of 'conceptual art' as he caricatured the art world's scramble to impose monetary value on ideas. Each Tableau is a contract which is sold for a random price. The title of the concept is etched on a metal plate with the idea printed on paper and signed below it. On purchase, the owner becomes entitled to have the idea realised at any time during the artist's life, but will be responsible for the management of the project as well as all costs, including a negotiated hourly rate of pay for Keinholz and assistants. All that is purchased is the idea. These works are pot shots at the corporatisation and disfigurement of art and are designed to superintend the conduct of its development at a time when a huge influx of money was tailoring the Emperor's new clothes. And they demonstrate how firmly Kienholz had his finger on the pulse, using the look of a newly emergent oeuvre to warn against its own pitfalls.

This is also the case in 'Still Live' where the viewer is invited to sit in front of a loaded revolver for five minutes. The gun's mechanism has three timers which have been set blindly to trigger the gun at any time over the subsequent seventy years. Any participant accepting the task has to sign a disclaimer. 'Still Live,' with its title playing with the notion of traditional still life compositions, is an affirmation of how fundamentally important art can be, and should be. As Willy Rotzlet suggests, it "demonstrates his opposition to every form of escapist, reality-denying or merely aesthetic art." It also lampoons established roles. Kienholz told me that he often felt in the "firing line" from the public and from critics, particularly at the private openings to his exhibitions. But it is also a commentary on the pomposity and megalomania of the huge environmental sculptural projects that in 1971, a year before the inception of 'Still Live,' had claimed the life of a rigger while he dismantled...
a colossal Richard Serra sculpture. And ‘Still Live’ could be viewed as an ominous portent of further lives lost. A bystander crushed by one of Christo’s 1,760 yellow umbrellas in 1991, or the 2006 death of the sculptor Luis Jimenez when one of his own works fell on him. Or in the same year the two people killed inside Maurice Agis’ inflatable sculpture ‘Dreamscape’ when it broke its moorings.

‘The Art Show’ consists of 19 figures that Kienholz cast from family, friends, dealers, critics and collectors, which included Eduardo Paolozzi, Yoshi Lida and Pontus Hulten. They were all asked to select, and then record a passage from an especially glutinous, incoherent piece of writing by an art critic. Each figure, representing a member of an audience at a private viewing, has a car air vent in place of its face, out of which, when activated by a real viewer, the pre-recorded hot air gushes. Each time ‘The Art Show’ is exhibited, the work that the figures are contemplating is changed, allowing Kienholz to promote work by little known artists just as he did during the All City Outdoor Art show.

The implication of this work is clearly defined and while it is less successful than the other ‘Art about art’ works due to its forgettable one-line joke and isolated contextual aperture, it does represent, by the very ambition of the project, which was produced over a 14 year period between 1963-1977 as well as its prolific circulation as a touring piece, another shot across the bows of the art world. So much so that any indecipherable self-serving critique of this work would have only added to its potency, rendering it immune. The sad irony exists in the fact that ‘The Art Show’ was critically overlooked, a self fulfilling prophecy that blunted its intent.

Moreover, all four of these ‘art about art’ pieces, ‘Back Seat Dodge 38,’ the ‘Concept Tableaux and Watercolours,’ ‘Still Live’ and ‘The Art Show’ have not only worked to
maintain the liberty of the creative act through satire, ridicule and disclosure while at the same time providing a language laboratory for broader, more inclusive works, but they have distorted the way critics and commentators have necessarily come to view Kienholz's practice. By crossing genres while at the same time referencing concurrent developments, his work of the late 1960's and 1970's does not fit into any categorisation. And although, as is suggested by Edward Allington that in 'Roxys' Kienholz "invented" installation art, his art has had to be assessed on its independent merits and not as a contribution to a particular methodology or theory. And so when 'The Illegal Operation' and 'The Portable War Memorial' are aired, the fact that they are 'bigger' than art, the fact that they do not simply represent important historical moments in a particular movement or ism, means that their relevance remains intact and they retain their psychological grip. They continue to engage activistally, albeit problematically.

'The Illegal operation' consists of a single light bulb that hangs over an arrangement of medical implements. A bloodstained and split concrete cushion sits atop a shopping trolley that has been converted into a surgical table. Beneath there is a hospital bed pan full of soiled rags and a blood red milking stool. This piece is unequivocal. Although its title does not specifically refer to the termination of a pregnancy, the anthropomorphism of the objects selected leaves no doubt as to the hub of Kienholz's concern, framed by a national debate over the merits of a legalised system of abortion. As David Colosi reflects "timeliness made it unnecessary to make the theme explicit," the viewer fills in the gaps with their own subliminal understanding of fervid contemporary issues. And it is this manipulation of
events outside of the art world in order to enhance and expose weaknesses and/or hypocrisies within imposed social orders with which Kienholz demonstrates his expertise in both 'The Illegal Operation' and 'The Portable War Memorial.'

'The portable War Memorial,' completed in 1968 and which is 32 feet wide by 8 feet deep and 9 feet high is made up of panels that are designed to read from left to right. The first panel has propaganda posters from both world wars while in front of them a figure covered by an upturned rubbish bin sings 'god Bless America.' The next section has five headless but helmeted military figures that are attempting to plant the American flag in a patio table. The image parodies Felix de Weldon's bronze sculpture that was itself based on Joseph Rosenthal's iconic photograph of marines raising the flag on Mount Suribachi during the battle for Iwo Jima. Behind their satirical struggle is a blackboard with the names of 475 nations that no longer exist, as well as a text that invites us to commemorate the ending of future as yet unforeseen wars, which reads, 'A Portable War Memorial/Commemorating V—Day/19---.' The last third of the tableau is devoted to the recreation through a photographic device, of a young couple at a hot dog bar as well as more patio furniture and a working Coca-Cola machine. Like 'The Illegal operation' this work is unambiguous in terms of the sphere of its discourse. And it is quickened by the broader backdrop of the Vietnam war and in particular the 1968 Tet Offensive which to many Americans was the first indication that they might lose the war.

'The Illegal operation' and 'The Portable War Memorial' represent two out of only three Kienholz pieces that come close to being great works. Great in the sense of a work not only performing their aesthetic functions well, but also re-contextualising
and freeze-framing the culturally fluid relationship between artist and viewer in just the way Masaccio did in his paintings for the Carmelite church in Florence. And since this work is widely acknowledged as a ‘masterpiece,’ it is reasonable to maintain that Kienholz produced three ‘near’ masterpieces, the third being ‘Ozymandias Parade’ (fig 12.6) of 1985 which I will discuss later in this chapter. Nevertheless, ‘The Illegal Operation’ and ‘The Portable War Memorial’ come close to this categorization for three initial reasons.

Firstly, they identify most concisely those moments when Kienholz’s language works best, which is when he is examining the quandaries and absurdities of modern life without putting forward any overtly partisan notions. Unfortunately the human requirement to find certainties, a concept antithetical to Kienholz’s best works, is still evident in the way these works are often viewed and written about. Robert Pincus Witten writes that ‘The Illegal Operation,’ “functions as a kind of mirror of our attitude concerning a woman’s right to abortion,” and claims for it a metaphorical projection that, “would become a reality once again if the crusaders against abortion were to have their way.”

Pincus’ reading of this work is incorrect. Not only is he rounding off the imagery to fit a tradition of narrative authoritativeness, but he is also grafting on to Kienholz a liberal agenda that does not stand up to scrutiny both from what we know about his personality nor the pattern of his thematic concerns. His intention in these to works was to ‘mix it up.’ Waldemar Januszczak likens him to the Unabomber. “Both make things out of recycled materials found in the trailer park: home made bombs in the case of the Unabomber; home made anti-establishment figurative sculpture in
Kienholz's case." And Robert Hughes' accurate assertion that Kienholz was a "compulsive puritan" exacerbates the affinity. So in the same way that the 'The Psyco Vendetta Case' is not an anti capital punishment piece, (If it had been Kienholz would not have referenced two cases where it was the process rather than the punishment that was found wanting) 'The Illegal Operation' is not a pro-abortion work. Instead it is asking us to recognise the horror of amateur terminations as well as the predicaments that would, and do, continue to make such operations continue long after abortion was made legal in the United States in 1973. In the period between 1975 and 1979, 11,300 amateur and or illegal terminations were carried out, significantly with only 17 deaths. Significant because the blood implied in this sculpture is conventionally taken to be that of the pregnant woman. The lack of what David Colosi refers to as "unidentifiable offal" to denote a foetus is overlooked even though we must interpret the obvious signs of intervention as meaning that the procedure has already taken place. When this sculpture was made in 1962, the debate was less focused on the rights of the woman, as it was to become a decade later, but more focused on the status of the unborn child. At what point does termination become murder. This is the crux of 'The Illegal operation.' It is Kienholz pinpointing the unfathomable and the unsolvable. So the idea that he would have simply overlooked, or found it too 'difficult' to represent the foetus is inconceivable. The foetus is conspicuous by its absence. Kienholz is pointing to the epicentre of the debate, which today is built around the viability of a foetus to survive a premature birth, but which then was necessarily based around less favourable science, but with an equally divisive set of both hypothetical and circumstantial hypothesise. But Kienholz's missing foetus does not represent his entry into an impossibly uncertain dialogue, but rather his assertion of where the focus of the discourse should rest.
Pincus Witten also misinterprets ‘The Portable war Memorial’ stating that it “concerns itself with the inseparability of the war making and peacetime aspects of American society.”\textsuperscript{16} And Reagan Upshaw claims for it the evocation of “a past war in Asia”\textsuperscript{19} and that it stands as a “rebuke to the one currently raging.” Again, Kienholz is smothered by liberal transference when in fact this work represents Kienholz at his most belligerent and iconoclastic.

The ‘timeliness’ of the work deceives the viewer into registering it as an anti-war tableau, when in fact it is an illustration of the absurdity of the unbreakable cycle of conflict. At a time of ‘bad war’ he uses the most iconic symbol of the last ‘good war’ to demonstrate the notion that it is not war in itself that is absurd, but the fact that war is at times necessary and morally legitimate. Although this is not an illiberal view per se, it did run counter to the prevailing national mood in 1968. And contrary to Reagan Upshaw’s assertion, the 475 nations featured on the blackboard did not all reach extinction through conflict. Many of them became geographically or politically absorbed or simply irrelevant. Kienholz’s inclusion of these should be seen as a focal recalibration, pointing to the arbitrary nature of natural boundaries which have seen the whimsy of a cartographer’s pen induce much of the absurdity of war and suffering. He suggests that patriotism is a false construct, and the concept of nationhood a dangerous distraction. And so by making a work that is not anti-war at a time when anti-war sentiment was developing into a mainstream liberal consensus, Kienholz was reconfiguring fundamental questions that were in danger of being subsumed and diverted by the weight of an overwhelmingly myopic social unanimity.
The second reason 'The Illegal Operation' and 'The Portable War Memorial' are so important is because they demonstrate resistance to time. Their impact has not faded or diminished over forty years, and because they were never fashionable pieces, they never had the chance to go out of fashion or to look passé. Neither of these pieces are pure in their illustration of particular modes of contemporary art and they do not rely on prior knowledge of the subject or of contemporary practice in order for the viewer to engage. And so because 'The Illegal operation' was not about American women, the fact that the majority of them now have access to legal and safe terminations does not affect the relevance of the sculpture. 'The Portable War Memorial,' which has as its thesis the continuum of base absurdity, tragically continues not to disappoint. And the appropriation of Rosenthal's image, with all the weight of social familiarity and cultural significance attached, lends Kienholz's work visual longevity by proxy, allowing three dimensional heresy the same protection from visual fatigue as that of the icon. But since the modern icon has become debased by the fast tracking of its untested status, the longevity of these two sculptures' success is only a superficial reflection of what it could have been. Nevertheless, even though neither of these works offer solutions that could become outdated or redundant, they do make it clear as to the vicinity in which the debate should take place. The presentation of moral and ethical impasse offers the viewer a cleft stick which on one hand offers empowerment through knowledge, while on the other, bewilderment and confusion. Both of these sculptures should place doubts in the viewer's mind that question the adequacy of their initial response and encourage alterations in their positions. By creating the circumstances where the silent dialogue expands beyond the art space, a more permutational, more sustainable autonomous change can be activated. And it is precisely this ambition, that had it been realised,
would have made these two works 'masterpieces.' Instead, the ease with which they can be incorrectly identified as straight-forward works of protest or personal declaration, stops them achieving a greater clarity: a clarity that comes outside of the art space when the viewer has assimilated the legitimate confusion that is the result of the suppression of dogma. Unfortunately, it is Kienholz’s inability to find a sufficiently subtle language that reduces his impact. His background in the rough and tumble of the 'art wars' created a belligerent and at times overly candid aesthetic that blinded him to the practical possibilities of an approach that could speak more perniciously through cunning and guile, even if it meant adopting the vestments of an art world he so despised.

The final reason why these two works are important is that 'Ozymandias Parade' of 1985, which is Kienholz’s last critically indicative work, can be traced directly back to the 'The Illegal Operation' and 'The Portable War Memorial'. This does not reduce them to mere artefacts. On the contrary, the fact that they continue to engage, as evidenced by the lineage that can be claimed for 'Ozymandias Parade' and witnessed even more significantly in any survey of Thomas Hirschhorn’s practice, demonstrates that the depiction of doubt and uncertainty with a smattering of focal intervention is a more accurate means of activistic engagement than the preaching of individual declarations.

'Ozymandias Parade,' is a huge pointed float approximately 13 by 29 by 15 feet with three mounted and blindfolded dictators on top. Two are astride horses and a third sits on the shoulders of a skeletal old woman, holding forth a pole with symbols from different faiths hanging down in front of what had once been a face. The woman,
who represents the taxpayer, pulls behind her a cart full of fake money on which is a pork barrel adorned with pig's snouts as well as an array of broken toy military aircraft. Hundreds of toy tanks, gunboats and aircraft litter the floor which is made of mirrored Perspex. At neatly spaced intervals, clusters of small figures representing third world communities from around the globe look on at the 'civilised' world with envy. Along the base of the float, synchronised red white and blue bulbs flash, and a recording of 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' blares out of hidden speakers.

That 'Ozymandias Parade' does show Kienholz's hand too much, or as Robert Hughes claims, it "becomes a fulsome preachy bore," does stop it being a great work, and it lacks the quiet parasitic resilience that takes better works beyond the art space. But its overstated, chaotic and desperate 'look' make it an important staging post between works such as Hirshhorn's 'Superficial Engagement,' and the 'Illegal Operation' and 'The Portable War Memorial.' Nevertheless, it is a good anti-war piece of art, and made during a period when Kienholz was being out-smarted by a newly irreverent comedic orthodoxy both on television and in print. A period post 1973 when on learning of Henry Kissinger's receipt of the Nobel Peace prize, Tom Lehrer reflected that, "it was at that moment that satire died." But 'Ozymandias Parade' is more than just an anti-war piece. As Kienholz's wife and collaborator, Nancy Reddin Kienholz states, "it is about leadership or the lack thereof." and the title, referencing Percy Shelley's poem 'Ozymandias,' "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings: Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" is cited by Reddin when she claims for the sculpture that, "it questions whether the leaders themselves believe they are more important than the people they are purported to lead." But the imagery contained within this work is sufficient to lead the viewer to a quick comprehension of the artist's aim. The likelihood that more than a small
minority of viewers will be aware of Shelley's poem, which could act to put flesh on to
the bones of an already overly instructive work, is a gamble that fails. So instead of a
belt and braces approach to the work's perception, the title proffers a distraction
whereby a viewer ignorant of Shelley's work can doubt their own intuitive take on the
object in front of them, and start to imagine that it is a more complex and more
difficult a work than in fact it is. And this is a major flaw in 'Ozymandias Parade.'

But where this sculpture does manage to expand beyond simply being a good, albeit
defective anti-war piece is in its use of a different, more overtly parasitic engagement
device which acts as another example of how adept Kienholz became at
manipulating the art space in order to develop themes that are more integral, and in
this case less "preachy" than they might seem on first impression.

The question 'do you think your government is doing a good job?' is asked of the
local populace wherever 'Ozymandias Parade' is exhibited, and the consensus is
written across the faces of the dictators. Until 2005 when it was displayed at the
Baltic in Gateshead, less than thirty miles from Tony Blair's Sedgefield constituency,
the answer had always been 'No.' At the Baltic however, the dictators wore 'Yes.'

This device forces any viewer who has not been consulted to firstly search their own
personal prerogatives, which due to the oblique and nonspecific nature of the
question becomes a broad exploration, and one that would likely last beyond the
confines of the gallery. And a viewer being presented with a textual assertion that
runs counter to their own position, but contained within imagery with which they can
associate, might be left with a lingering sense that they have been assaulted by a
friend. A disenfranchisement that questions the utility of art when it speaks
absolutely, free from exceptions and without doubt or conditions. A
disenfranchisement which Kienholz exploits to hammer home his thesis that art should simply recalibrate the questions without stepping into the fray.

Concieved in 1984, the year of Ronald Reagan’s landslide second term victory over the democrat Walter Mondale, and completed the following year when his administration admitted to their policy of sponsoring armed insurgencies against what they perceived to be Soviet-Backed governments in the third world, regardless of their democratic legitimacy, and when his personal approval rating was at 62%, ‘Ozymandias Parade’ played to a captive audience where ‘No’ was the most usual language of the counter view. But this sculpture works best when, as was the case at the Baltic, it says ‘Yes.’ Because for a work of this kind to endorse a government that has taken a country to war, it represents a perfect Kienholzian conundrum, and one which raises the question of global empathetic responsibility verses localised prosperity. A question which Hirschhorn raises in ‘World Airport’ 1999, when the term ‘Globalisation’ had reached the status of mantra. And Hirschhorn and Kienholz suffer the same problem in that their best works, which take a conceptual scatter gun approach, rely on the viewer having the resources both in terms of knowledge of intent, and time, to pick up the pellets that have met their targets. And yet the fact that they both continue to be written about in terms that only superficially puts together their visual signifiers, means that there is an innate inability in these pieces to work to the full extent of their ambition.

After Kienholz’s death in 1994, his friend and fellow sculptor Richard Jackson wrote, that the thing he liked most about Kienholz’s work was that “it’s real democratic. It doesn’t take a PhD to understand it. So it kinda spoke to everyone.” And it is here
where the paradox lies. His work did speak broadly and to a wide constituency, the need to do so having been a result of his early confrontations with the authorities in Los Angeles. But his three most significant works, 'The Portable War Memorial,' 'The illegal Operation' and 'Ozymandias Parade' are only the most significant because they come closest to realising the extra ambition. And the ambition fails to be realised precisely because of the level of study that is needed to receive the added weight that these pieces carry. They miss out on being 'great' works because the second level on which they could function, the level which could provide a far more lasting engagement with the viewer and so potentially effect more change, is too complex, and Kienholz lacked the skill to vary his palette according to the density and destination of his concerns. But Kienholz should be looked on more kindly than other artists whose attempts to activate change are to some extent flawed, because in his case there is never any question as to his sincerity nor his absolute commitment toward the communication or the facilitation of truth. Often the confusion and distortion that occurs in his work is a result of the continuation of the rear-guard action that he fought until the end. And It was an entirely altruistic campaign against cynical forces that sought to dampen and censor, one which magnified and confirmed the potential of the activity of making art.

Nevertheless, all three pieces fit a 'Activist' definition, as do so many of Kienholz's lesser works. And despite the problems that I have outlined in 'Ozymandias Parade,' this is the piece that comes closest of the three to being a great work, or a 'masterpiece,' because if the sub-text, or 'ambition' of the work is by-passed and it is approached only superficially, there is less distortion. Its rationale remains the same. Whereas 'The Illegal Operation' is taken to be a pro-abortion work, and 'The Portable War Memorial,' an anti war work, 'Ozymandias Parade' remains anti
authoritarian, iconoclastic and anti war, whether or not the viewer recognises the complex manipulations that Kienholz is delivering, and regardless of whether they have a PhD.
CHAPTER 6 NOTES

1. From personal communication, Hope, Idaho, August 1987

2. From personal communication, Hope, Idaho, August 1987


5. This Kienholz continued to do throughout his life, for example his 1978 installation, 'The Art Show,' which was partly designed for this purpose.


23. Shelley, P.B. *Ozymandias*. Poem first published 1818

Chapter 7 - Practice

In order to understand how my analysis of the artist’s work that I have embarked upon over the previous 6 chapters has affected my own studio practice, an examination of the practical points of departure that led me to undertake this research project will help contextualise the evaluative and interpretive inclinations that have shaped my new working methodology. The disquiet that I felt within my established strategies was also a result of viewing work that does not contribute to a concentrated investigation into activist art per se, but which has had a significant baring on the way that I have come to scrutinise it.

In August 2005 I exhibited an installation, ‘Red Hot and Dutch’(2001)(fig 1.7) at the University of New Orleans. It was intended to chart the lives and ponder the deaths of the 7,079 Bosnian civilians that Dutch United Nations peace keepers delivered to the Army of Republika Srpska in and around Srebrenica and who were subsequently murdered between the 11th and the 16th of July 1995. Since making this work the death toll has been revised to 8,372, 500 of whom were under 18. Many were children, and infants were amongst the victims.

The way I responded to the Srebrenica massacre was to describe it. I laminated 7,079 randomly selected portraits cut from newspapers onto 7,079 luggage tags. The tags were numbered and strung around the exhibition space. At intervals of six feet, oscillating fans blew the tags rhythmically. These were placed on derelict, burnt chairs and stools. Over the course of the installation’s display, the wind that was created by the fans circulated the smell of the burnt wood and also created
groupings in the tags as they found their own form of tangled families. It also created a change in the sound, as the fluttering of the cardboard became more congealed.

New Orleans was the second time that I had shown 'Red Hot and Dutch.' On both occasions I was satisfied with the 'look' of the installation. It was simple and visually ordered. It was aesthetically comfortable and conformed to a familiar art language. However after both outings, I had significant misgivings about it which I put down to the fact that between the 11th and 16th of July 1995 when the massacre had taken place, I had been in Cambodia engaged in research for an installation which was centred around the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. I had watched the Srebrenica story unfold on satellite television. Thermal imaging footage taken from the air was broadcast which illustrated suspicions that the civilians who had been promised a safe haven, had instead been murdered. Due to the fact that this was happening in Europe, the five and a half thousand miles that separated Phnom Penh from Srebrenica made my presence feel anthropological. While the resultant work, 'Year......' 1996,(fig 2.7) did attest to the Khmer Rouge's propensity toward their own peculiar photographic documentation and so was specific in nature, there was an underlying sense that 'Red Hot and Dutch' was insufficiently succinct. It too, was anthropological, but only in the way that a night hawker's collection of arrow heads might be visually graceful in the solemnity of its presentation, but divorced from any kind of meaning beyond a cursory acknowledgement of their wider elegiac significance.

In January 2007, 18 months after the New Orleans exhibition, and three months after beginning this research project, I walked in front of a truck that had stopped at traffic lights at the intersection of Canal and Baxter Street in Manhattan's busy China Town. I gave the vehicle a double look which caught the eye of the driver, who was
Carlos Arredondo (fig 3.7). From the back of his truck, a flag draped coffin protruded and the words 'My son K.I.A. Iraq,' were written in large letters down the side. A photograph of his son Alex in his Marine dress uniform sat amongst pairs of his army boots and an attached trailer containing dozens of vertically planted crutches, crosses and prosthetic limbs brought up the rear.

At this time I was unaware of the events that had taken place two and a half years earlier on the 24th of August 2004 when the U S Marine's Casualty Assistance team had arrived at the Florida home of Carlos Arredondo to inform him that his 20 year old son had been killed in Iraq. On hearing the news he went to his garage and collected a sledge hammer and a gallon of petrol which he poured over himself. He smashed his way into the van in which the Marines had arrived and set himself alight. He suffered second and third degree burns to 26% of his body. He was however well enough to be taken by stretcher to his son's funeral.

Since the day Carlos Arredondo set himself alight, he has been the subject of media interest, and his truck and the flag-draped coffin have been in attendance at many anti war protests. In September 2007 at a protest in Washington he was beaten by a group of pro-war activists calling themselves 'The Gathering of Eagles,' after he tried to stop his son's photograph being ripped from the coffin. As well as having high profile supporters such as Senator Ted Kennedy, incidents like this have kept him in the spotlight. There has never been however, any suggestion that what Arredondo has created either on, or off his truck, is art.

Also in January 2007 I visited the first retrospective of the work of Martin Ramirez that was staged at The American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan (fig 4.7). Ramirez, who died in 1963 at the age of 72 had been institutionalised from 1931 onwards after
having been diagnosed with catatonic schizophrenia. However the drawings and collages that he made from scraps of brown paper and from pages torn from books and magazines, offer a caustic critique of popular North American culture with repeat images of cowboys and Madonna’s as well as trains entering and exiting long biological tunnels.

Ramirez’ status now places him alongside Adolf Wolffli and Henry Darger, both of whom have been afforded retrospectives at The American Folk Museum and all of whom represent the clearest, and both in terms of critical and fiscal value, examples of what is most commonly termed ‘outsider art,’ a phrase which has now been replaced with the blander but more inclusive genre appellation ‘Self taught.’ The re-phrasing, or re-branding of an art which Peter Schjeldahl claims, ‘comes from and goes nowhere in art history,’ indicates a broader acceptance of art which does not have a traditional pedigree, be it cultural or educational, and this at a time when mental illness is far more understood. A chronic mental illness which in the past may have been regarded as witnessing an abnormal interpretation of reality, is now far more likely to be viewed as a parallel, complementary explication of meaning, one which is both empathetic, and if not always welcoming of extremes of behaviour, at least appreciative of the contrasting and often complex decision-making processes that lead to it. This implied denunciation of authentic truth, delivered with caustic humour and or offence suggests a capacity that was deficient in ‘Red Hot and Dutch.’

Carlos Arredondo’s 2004 self immolation was circumstantially axiomatic and so not as extreme an act as it might seem in the initial telling. Also in 2004 the Chinese artist Yang Zhichao’s performed ‘Earth,’ during which he invited a doctor to implant a portion of soil into the roof of his stomach. Zhichao was attempting to ‘bridge the gap’
between an idealised relationship with the environment, and the reality of how it is dismissed, abused and rejected. The rejection by his body and the subsequent pain was for Zhichao not simply representative or symbolic, 'only the personal experience of pain lets me achieve insights which cannot be reached on the level of abstraction.'

Arredondo and Zhichao's pain have different causes, but they are both identical in their purpose. They are both demonstrating a broken link. For Arredondo it is with his son. While for Zhichao it is with the land. However the essential difference between the two actions, apart from planning, is their type of location. 'Earth' was performed in an art setting, at The DaDao Festival of Live Art, in Beijing, while Arredondo's immolation was in a street in a Florida suburb. The fact that Arredondo did not intend to make art should be taken out of the equation. Martin Ramirez was not able to understand 'art' as being something distinct from communication. Indeed in Roberta Smith's review of the Ramirez retrospective she claims that 'Ramirez' art was, like all great art, typically site-specific, that is, firmly rooted in real experiences and memories that he reshaped and distilled according to his needs and talents.' It is Smith's notion of 'real experiences' which go some way to explaining how and when a work is operating within a language that is effective. This does not mean that artists can only make good art about things they have witnessed or had some first had knowledge of. For example, through his 'Systems Analysis,' Hans Haacke made pieces that have created the legislative will to impose restrictions on practices of which he had no direct experience. Yet with works such as 'Red Hot and Dutch,' and 'Year......' it was more than geography that distilled them down into anthropology. The visceral, obsessive re-enactment, what Smith calls 'need,' is missing. I had no 'need' to respond to the genocide in Srebrenica other than to
express my disgust and to create an environment where cold statistics and empathetic opportunity could blend. 'Need' was replaced by a conservative format which through an initial series of computer generated visual proposals, and then subsequent photographic documentation for its second outing, secured its exposure. The 'need' for Arredondo was more didactic, more pressing.

In the case of activist art, the ability of it to engender in an audience the will to actively seek change is the benchmark of success. Arredondo's instinctive behaviour, his intuitive performance, led him to a course of action which advertised his thesis. The spectacle of his immolation, which was broadcast live from a news helicopter, has for the most part gilded the passage of his memorial truck and endorsement from on high has been a result of his consequent profile. However Zhichao's actions, which like Arredondo's were potentially life threatening, sought to manufacture a situation where-by experience could be had, in his case, the experience of having soil implanted and the sensation of its rejection and eventual expulsion. Zhichao's highlighting of our environmental infractions is a meritorious thematic conceit, but not one which should be received as having any peculiar insight. The interest of his self-inflicted pain in the name, at least in part, of art, a ploy exploited ritualistically by the Viennese Actionists in the late sixties and early seventies, is the spectacle by which an audience can be reeled in. However the presumption that because Zhichao is from China, a county that is viewed by the west to sanction environmental devastation, does not offer Zhichao a special licence to be heard, or oblige us to listen.

Not limiting the level of intuition that should, or could be brought into a practice, or an individual work, does not mean that at times there can be too much. Experience can envelop an approach, creating a symbolism which is indulgent and non-
communicative. In 1996 I made a work called ‘A Man on the Road, Kasese to Kigali’ (fig 5.7). It consisted of four box frames with a grossly extended bobble hat in the colours of the Rwandan flag spaced in equal part within each frame. The work was made as a result of my own experience of witnessing a Rwandan man murdered by a small mob and then laid across a road at a blind corner only to be dissected by oncoming lorries.

In making this work, I was relying too heavily on the personal language of both observation and participation. My ‘instinct’ was to memorialise, and my ‘intuition’ distracted me from viewer response. This piece was oblique and its narrative abstruse, and yet indicatively and significantly when it was exhibited in Sweden in 2001 it received extremely favourable reviews. This positive reaction can only have been the result of a fundamental disjunct in expectation.

The frequent breakdown in the relationship between intention and reaction in that which constitutes an art practice that can be said to most appropriately and sustainably promote change has been at the core of this research project. ‘Red Hot and Dutch’ and ‘A Man on the Road, Kasese to Kigali,’ are pieces at either end of the ‘reshaping of real experiences and memories’ spectrum. For both to have been critically received so well as to be considered successful, blunted my practice. This forced not only a tactical re-evaluation in terms of what should be made, but also an appraisal of the remaining moral and ethical incentives when a misanthropic hue is cast over the way in which one might explain events.

My work was about specific events, either experienced and witnessed or learned second hand, the narrative solidity, or ‘history’ of the episodes create the circumstances by which an aestheticized and acquiescent methodology was only
ever able to present polite outrage as constructed through a mannered art world orthodoxy. The smell of burning flesh in a Florida suburb may not represent an adequate, or practical oppositionality to this, and Ramirez’ pasquinade might offer too enigmatic an approach to suggest focused insight. However both of their communicative procedures are unconstrained and self-sufficient, and have no reliance on institutional or cultural structures or hierarchies. This liberty is a manifest blessing if an art is to transgress fluidly and relevantly. The problem arises however when we consider how we know about Ramirez and Arredondo.

Ramirez was ‘discovered’ by chance by a professor of Psychology and Art, Tarmo Pasto, who was visiting De Witt hospital near Sacramento. It would be reasonable to assume that huge amounts of important contributions have never seen the light of day due to a lack of such serendipity. Arredondo is relatively unknown in the U K. If I had not been visiting New York at that moment I would never have seen his truck and it is unlikely that I would now be aware of his story or his objects. My double take was in part due to my knowledge of Edward Kienholz, an artist who although he has had a high profile since the early 1960’s could not be considered a house-hold name, but whose work is reminiscent of Arredondo’s own assemblages. Chance and connected prior knowledge played the major role in my fleeting curiosity. My inclination was to go over to the truck and look more closely. I was not looking at it as a work of art, as I now do, at the time it was simply an oddity, albeit one with extremely resonant associations. My failure to engage was based on my fear of potential embarrassment, a reluctance to be drawn into an eccentricity, and therefore out of the cosy anonymity of a busy city street. Had Arredondo’s truck been in an art gallery I would have interacted with it more fully and so his message would have landed a more concise blow. Yet it would not have been a productive use of his
efforts since those who visit art galleries are by trend, those most receptive to a
counter view and more willing to capitulate to the specific pathos and in this case the
anti-war overtures. This hypothesis assumes the unlikely event that a gallery could
be found to host an overtly political work by a completely unknown artist.

Arredondo's greatest remuneration was and still is, even after the lifting of the ban on
the media coverage of repatriated military coffins, to be garnered from those latent
'Gathered Eagles' along the road side and at the intersections.

When I began this research project in October 2006, I was still focused on trying to
explain and present specific events. In particular an incident that happened in Kigali
in Rwanda in 1995 when 10 Belgian UN peace keepers were executed after having
been forced to eat their own penises. This was after having been told by the UN
commander in the region to hand over their weapons as the UN mandate did not
allow them to open fire in self defence.

I began by working two dimensionally on A4 and three dimensionally in clay. The
clay offered me an immediacy that I felt had been lacking in my previous work which
had demanded a level of management that suppressed a fluid response to images
and an intuitive approach to context. The clay work mirrored the two dimensional
work, becoming three dimensional sketches. I made a series of five clay heads (fig
6.7), the starting point for each being the dropping of a 12.5 kilogram bag of clay on
its end, the chance shape being dictated by the impact, bringing an element of
uncertainty to these representations of the Belgian soldiers. I realise retrospectively
that these two and three-dimensional sketches were influenced in part by a journey I
had made across the Ethiopian Highlands where I experienced the painted interiors
of the Orthodox churches in Axum, Lalibela and Gondar, fused with the petrified remains of priests who had made long journeys to die at these sites.

The two dimensional work continued to play a significant support role in my practice although it is most usually of a small scale, in sketchbooks or note books. I also made a large quantity of three-dimensional 'components' (fig 7.7), such as ceramic mouths, ears, goggles, eyes and noses as well as ceramic text. My intention was that once they were fired, I would use them rapidly, working intuitively. Screwing them down on to wood or bark, possibly within the landscape to produce macabre relief interventions in a material not normally associated with spontaneity. I wanted to find an alternative way of delivering a visual response that did not rely on traditional territories and that had a clear immediacy which mirrored not only the horror of the events in Kigali, but the trauma of having to reflect and expose it.

Although these three-dimensional sketches have not yet been exploited, and to date the 'Bag Heads' have not been fully realised after their firing, they have helped to initiate three much larger ceramic pieces which could also be said to be components, but with which I have pushed the limits of the medium in terms of its practical application. I produced two large heads, approximately three feet tall, as well as a horse head and neck of roughly life scale.

All the ceramic work is made using 'Crank' clay, which is particularly good for sculpting because it is open bodied and has high grog content. Grog is particles of pre-fired clay, or fire block. It gives the clay a gritty texture and it means that there is less shrinkage during the firing. I have then put it through a reduction firing which is when the passage of secondary air in the kiln is restricted, the pressure in the firing chamber being controlled with a flue damper. The kiln's atmosphere seeks out
oxygen to enable it to burn, and so it grabs the chemically combined oxygen which is 
in the metal oxides in the clay. In this case the iron spot crystals are drawn from the 
clay to the surface producing the dark brown complexion. This process leaves the 
clay extremely strong and suitable for large-scale work where the weight bearing 
down on itself can be extreme. On the surface of most of these clay components I 
have pressed in little dots of clay with holes in the middle to drop solder into after 
firing. The solder is a decorative device intended to invite the viewer's closer 
attention, to bring them to a place of my contrivance. It is an engagement device.

While I was making these components I was simultaneously researching Christian 
Boltanski. It became apparent that Boltanski does not trying to change the world as 
would an activist artist; instead he is concerned with the impossibility of trying to 
understand it, largely because individual memory as he sees it is untrustworthy and 
often contradictory. In asking us to reject history, Boltanski foments a deliberately 
detached position, one which leads to uncertainty and doubt. This notion of 'not 
knowing' started to play an increasingly pivotal role in my studio practice. In 
understanding how easily I had been seduced by Boltanski, and recognising 
something of myself in what John Czaplicka calls "memory tourists," I began to 
appreciate not only what activism cannot be, but also how it might be possible to lure 
an audience toward a more purposeful dialogue using different, but equally 
mischievous devices. In the second half of the first year of this research project I 
began to develop three-dimensional ideas. I was still focused on the events in Kigali, 
but now I began to exploit the instant connections of real scale dimensions morphing 
the Belgian Infantrymen into cavalry in an ageing process intent at reinforcing 
imperialist aspirations. I have often felt antipathy toward horses, which I trace back to 
my home city of Liverpool where so many of the great and good are commemorated
on horseback. They have come to symbolise for me the worst excesses of Empire and subjugation, both domestic and international. I see horses as shallow creatures, leading men to places they shouldn't be. During the first two years of this project I made three horse forms, all with cardboard and wooden armatures then using, fibreglass and expanding polyurethane foam resin. Their forms have become constants in a shifting, reworking approach that is fuelled by my wider research. Ideas, developments and changing idiomatic components serve the horse form, not necessarily just as decoration, which as an element of spectacle is in itself a legitimate application, but as contextual shape shifters.

After viewing Thomas Hirschhorn’s installation 'Superficial Engagement' in New York in February 2006 I had considered him a bench-mark by which activist art could be assessed. However in looking more closely into his practice I came to a different view, and one which triggered a turning point in my own studio practice. I began to appreciate that his initial intent is not in fact to effect change, but to illustrate super-reality by suggesting to an audience the ‘normality’ of chaos. I have subsequently come to accept that Hirschhorn’s work can bring about change more sustainably through his slow release of empathetic recognition as it becomes a form of personal enfranchisement. This reading of Hirschhorn’s practice has led me away from focusing on specific incidents, and toward the making of objects that while retaining the presence, or ‘smell’ of the specific, can be layered and can overlap the mundane with the profound in order to illustrate the human condition, a condition that is unable to focus absolutely. The presentation of ‘too much’ information, with seemingly contradictory elements which arrive at an accurate approximation of over-load, fallibility, insincerity and fickle sensitivity, would also work to subvert traditionally
used mechanisms for assessing art. This does not mean however that particular works do not have specific themes or concerns that distinguish them. The chaos can be walked, like a laden fridge freezer, toward meaning. Indictments can be made and ideas expanded, but within a framework that recognises and accommodates the panoptic nature of human experience.

The emphatic, biographical persistence of Hirschhorn's displays are both specific and non-specific, vague yet explicit. His attempt to illustrate a 'super reality' uses the generalised authenticity of internal human confusion with the peculiarity of his own personal anxieties. The seeming randomness by which he interjects these occasionally intimate, but often popular concerns adds to the invitation extended to the viewer to invest their own confusion and their own internal contradictory views with a level of legitimacy. The sense that Hirschhorn finds no answers specific to his own contemplations reduces the risk of misinterpretation and solicits engagement in a way that a more categorical, assertive approach fails to achieve. The deceptive nature of certainty, as seen through Boltanski's rejection of history, acts as a subconscious bridge which has the potential to be a dominating aspect of a more inclusive, less singular yet more broadly functional activist practice. And it is precisely this assertion, which appears in both Hirschhorn and Kienholz's practice, that suggests a way of making an art which is less susceptible to the myriad of perception impediments.

Unlike the work of Doris Salcedo, for Hirschhorn there are no contextual limitations. Like Salcedo, he walks the tightrope of reception fidelity where his own calibrations lead away from the lay audience as the primary beneficiary, into an arena where his examination of the limitations of philosophical problem solving represent an indulgent and elitist layer of meaning. However, when Hirschhorn is at his most inclusive and
comprehensive, his practice finds a route beyond the local, while at the same time retaining its biographical personality, which succeeds due to its simplicity. Yet since the viewer understands the first hand nature of the concerns, concerns which may even be oppositional if they were to be debated, an empathetic connectivity still has the potential to create an atmosphere of solidarity and respect. The subconscious complexities trigger engagement through a recognition of the shared fragility of the human intellect. This is achieved through the soaking up and partial erasure of layers of opinion. Critically for Hirschhorn, the layering of different audience strata to which he attempts to communicate only succeeds in creating an overly complex visual proposition which marginalises a majority and deflects meaning, even the meaning of not meaning. Were Hirschhorn to illustrate ‘super reality’ without emphasising Bataille and Deleuze’s recognition of the shortcomings of a purely philosophical explanation of the world, the connection with the viewer would be simpler and one which is more receptive to the subliminal imposition of a political agenda. As it is, Hirschhorn fails to capitalise on the disarmament of the viewer. The opportunity to exploit their vulnerability through the candid description of typical, instinctive paradoxical internal impulses is wasted.

A critical re-examination of Kienholz’s work became the next logical step, not simply because at this time he represented to my mind an authentic paradigmatic standard by which to hone my understanding of the problems surrounding politically motivated art, but because there is an inescapable, albeit perfunctory visual similarity between Hirschhorn and Kienholz’s work. Indeed Kienholz’s ‘Ozymandias Parade’ would fit within Hirschhorn’s ‘Superficial Engagement’ with no contextual or visual awkwardness. My research into these two artists defines my new working methodology. Kienholz offers a way of fleshing out spectacle in a more theatrical yet
egalitarian way than Hirschhorn. More importantly, Kienholz provides a clear and more precise model of a working practice that is unflinching, belligerent and incorruptible while at the same time being unsceptical in its regard for the intelligence of the viewer, but which conversely, generally fails to hit the mark by offering and presuming too much. While Kienholz suffers from the same dampening convolutions, the way in which the ‘spectacle’ is used in Kienholz’s practice differs from that of Hirschhorn. The uncanny, macabre and repetitive blanket of texture and appropriated image in Hircshhorn’s displays define both the designated art space and the external public environment. This lures the viewer in, but does not aesthetically endear itself. They are enticing habitats that tempt the viewer to allow themselves to be spoken at, even when the sentences are never finished and the point rarely reached. They are scenes of enchanting excess and tortuous psychological intrusion, a scenario in which the viewer has been duped into a karaoke duet from which they can only flee with leaden boots. Kienholz’s ‘spectacle,’ with a few exceptions, most notably ‘The Illegal Operation,’ which should be judged in the light of Berman’s ‘Fuck Nationalism’ aesthetic gauntlet, is a combination of the cinematic and the evangelical mixed with the thrill of hearing ones first parental profanity.

Hirschhorn and Kienholz provide a framework through which I have been able to analyse why my work had become unsatisfactory. They do not however offer benchmarks because their practices are flawed, at least in terms of my ambition for them. Nevertheless, they have provided both visual and theoretical impetus, albeit not exclusively, that I feel has raised my own practice beyond the melancholia machine. Between the exhibition at the University of New Orleans in 2005 of my installation, ‘Red Hot and Dutch,’ and the start of this research project I was working toward a
piece that had the working title, 'Big Coffin' (fig 8.7). It was based around a
description in Romeo Dallaire's 2003 book, 'Shake Hands with the Devil'. Dallaire
was the Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda
between 1993-1994 during which time he witnessed the Rwandan Genocide. The
extract in question describes him entering a village during a funeral procession. The
coffin being carried is of an unusual length, and when Dallaire questions why this is
so, it is explained to him that the funeral is for a Tutsi woman who died while having
a tree pushed inside her by a group of Hutus. She was being buried with the tree still
in place in order to preserve what was left of her body. 'Big Coffin' was a re-
presentation of this woman's coffin, exaggerated and held aloft by a structure which
supported dozens of battery operated hand fans. As in 'Red Hot and Dutch,' I was to
use the creation of wind as a metaphor for breath and our inability to produce it when
life has left a body. 'Big Coffin,' was to be installed in a purpose built space which
would force the viewer to circle the object in a highly restricted space. I invited the
journalist and documentary maker, John Pilger to write a series of highly subjective
texts recording his own experiences of conflict on to the walls in chalk. The intention
was that throughout the duration of the installation, his personal reflections, what we
understand as the antithesis of good journalism, would become increasingly oblique
and ill-defined as more viewers were forced to rub against his words. 'Big Coffin,'
was never realised due mainly to my concerns surrounding the breadth and
cognisance of the audience and the unlikely-hood of any change of either perception
or action taking place due to its existence, as well as the difficult scheduling
practicalities of what was to be essentially a collaborative project. When I made the
decision to abandon this project in favour of a return to an academic research-based
support, I was aware of the intrinsic limitations of my own approach and held a
generalised dissatisfaction with contemporary practice that purported an activist agenda. The recognition that I should leave behind the specific in favour of a much broader universal and personalised narrative did not emerge until I had garnered a fresh acknowledgement of activist possibilities, as witnessed in the practice of Hirschhorn and Kienholz. However in retrospect, the period between my absorption into this potential, and the abandonment of 'Big Coffin,' is marked by a registering of spectacle as a key engagement device, even when I was still working toward the particularity of events, such as the killing of the Belgian soldiers in Kigali. In dropping solder into the surface of the clay, I was inviting a closer physical inspection which would contribute to a longer encounter, keeping the viewer occupied within my sphere of influence. My change in direction post 'Big Coffin' and pre Hirschhorn/Kienholz, could be characterised as being for the most part about medium, and its use as an engagement device as opposed to simply a construction technique. However the fact that I was allowing myself to expand on imagery, such as that of the Orthodox Ethiopian Churches, which has little contextual relevance, represents a recognition that the use of biography can act as a counterweight, not only by providing bespoke visual stimulants, but by indicating that there is a person behind the object as opposed to a cold strategy or a clear rational theory. Biography offers the disorder that implies that we are all in this together.

After my analysis of Hirchhorn and Kienholz, and my understanding of my own practice in light of their strengths and weaknesses, I separated out the various elements I had been working on, leaving some behind, and drawing those remaining into the three distinct equine sculptures which are titled, 'Not Knowing,' 'Not Knowing with Gusto,' and 'Speculation.' Viewed together they can be regarded as referencing the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,' as 'Not Knowing,' consists of two horses.
There are no biblical references in this work to ground it specifically within the 'Four Horsemen' tale, other than those that are simply due to the tradition into which I was born. The war, famine, pestilence and death of The Book of Revelation converge in each sculpture so that they can work separately, or together. Each work contains all four characteristics, and all three have been worked on at the same time, each referencing each other.

'Not Knowing with Gusto,'(figs 9.7-15.7) combines two ceramic heads, the smaller of the two sits on the rump of a horse form. Slumped on top of this head is a grossly exaggerated tricorn hat, covered in synthetic hair. On the furthest extremities of the tricorn form are before and after photographic portraits of US Marine Tyler Ziegel who was badly burnt while serving in Iraq. The horse has a dildo for a horn, making it a unicorn, a unicorn’s horn having the ability to neutralise poison. This is used in a similar way to my use of fans, in a futile attempt to reverse the irreversible. Yet myths being myths, they change nothing. They offer only short term succour, and so the unicorn myth is used onanistically. The surface of the horse is covered with images from works by Artemisia Gentileschi, Francois Boucher, Agnolo Bronzino and Titian, which are overlaid with text offering both statistical analyses of conflicts, as well as testimony from those who have taken part. For example there is attestation from a retired general practitioner who as a teenager had served in the Japanese Imperial Army during what has now come to be known as 'The Rape of Nanking.' He said, "I beheaded people, starved them to death, burned them and buried them alive, over two hundred in all." Hanging below the horse are feather balls which each offer appropriated photographic images, mostly portraits. These owe much to the hindi festival of Thaipusam during which a dance is performed called the Kavadi Attam. The Kavadi is a physical burden which is intended to avert calamity. The Kavadi
bearers carry semi circular metal frames by piercing their skin multiple times. Much of the surface of this work has been influenced by time spent in India including two recent visits to Kolkata in January 2009 and 2010.

'Not Knowing with Gusto' stands on four Galapagos tortoises which are both evolutionary signifiers that question the notion of progress and enlightenment, as well as practical instruments to raise the horse/unicorn in order for me to take advantage of its underside. They also lift the ensemble to a more monumental scale. Coming out of the side of two of the tortoises are nine wooden rods, all eight feet long, which pierce two wooden window frames appropriated from the ruins of the Rivesaltes Concentration Camp in South West France. On the ends of the wooden rods are small 7/3cm images of violence and the aftermath. The window frames have ceramic plaques screwed to them. Some of the plaques are deeply indented and are filled with clear polyurethane resin under which is text and more appropriated images. The text has a random, thoughtless nature. The images are oblique in their meaning, although all ten of the 1981 IRA hunger strikers are represented.

Within the top half of both window frames are more, larger appropriated images. On one is a found coloured photographic image of brothers. On the other is a copy of the photograph of the moment in 2009 when the newspaper vendor Ian Tomlinson (who subsequently died) was pushed to the ground by a policeman. On the backs of these framed images are ceramic texts. One reads, ‘Avert Hell Eyes,’ and on the other the repeated mantra ‘Fuck and Kill.’ Around the unicorn are three orange furry sashes. Two of them have ceramic texts. One reads, ‘Ian Tomlinson alcoholic 1962-2009.’ The other reads, ‘A Major Contribution To Art.’ The third sash supports a series of Polaroid photographs of a female nude in the style of Auguste Belloc and
were taken in front of 'Not Knowing with Gusto.' Within the tortoises are more resin images of the execution of Majid Kavousifar, who shot dead a prominent Iranian Judge, Hassan Moghaddas who himself was responsible for the killing of hundreds of political prisoners. Also attached are images of Allen Lee Davis' execution. Davis was convicted in 1982 of the beating to death of Nancy Weiler, who was three months pregnant. He also killed her 9 year old daughter, Kristina who he shot in the face twice, as well as her 5 year old sister, Katherine whom he shot as she tried to run away. By contrast there are other more prosaic images on and around 'Not Knowing with Gusto.'

This piece is not a pro or anti-death penalty work, nor is it a critique of the Islamic Revolutionary court. It is not a description of 'good judicial killing' verses 'bad judicial killing.' It is also not about 'good war' verses 'bad war.' Instead my intention is to examine those shades of grey, those extreme liberal and extreme illiberal thoughts and impulses that I have, and which I believe we all have. By including within this work visualisations of domesticity in the form of consumer durables and vital time-saving devices, I offer up the biographical ephemera of a middle aged, middle income child-heavy existence which is dominated by fear for my offspring. This condition has a new found empathetic limitation when relating to circumstances outside of this foreboding. These juxtapositions and seemingly contradictory visual signposts are attempting to licence the viewer and hopefully to free them from the constraints that have been placed upon them by the social requirement for a pestilential level of certainty and resolute thought.

'Not Knowing '(figs 16.7-19.7) is a rocking horse on which a ceramic head sits on its haunches with another horse head emerging from its mouth. On top of the head is a large portrait of me and around the neck of the primary horse is a ring of machine
guns. Post-it-notes cover a large surface area of this work. The horse’s head emerging from the ceramic head can be interpreted as relating to Pliny’s first century book of natural history in which he claims that the weasel conceives through the ear and gives birth through the mouth. The allegory has weasels signifying people who willingly hear, 'the seed of the divine word,' but then do nothing with what they have heard. In this sense only, this work is about weasels. The weasels are the audience, but the prime weasel is the artist, me, who becomes connected to the viewer through moral inertia.

As with ‘Not knowing,’ there are two dominant engagement devices in this work, spectacle and biography. It is however, a casual biography which can be pieced together through post-it-notes, and doodles which I have collected from my office and studio over the past three years. Collectively they intimately describe the last three years of my life far more candidly than a traditional diary or journal. However they make less logical sense in terms of a conventional chronology, as they detail a far more random and non-concise set of details and impulses.

The variety of M16 and AK47 sub machine guns are placed as a matador’s espada would be thrust deep between a bull’s shoulder blades. These guns are covered in doodles and notes, but they come closer to defining a more condensed set of concerns and considerations and anxieties than the post-it-notes. They are still random and impulsive, and while there is nothing included that has been deliberately designed to stop the viewer from getting a sense of mission, nothing has been removed that may obscure it. I have attempted to embellish the machine guns instinctively and with as little thought as possible. The only conscious interventions I have made have been to remove or refrain from describing any overly refined trains of thought.
Set at varying depths within the fabric of the guns are vintage examples of erotic photography, again set in clear casting polyurethane resin. These are both decorative in terms of their original use, and mannish in their barrack room content. However the use of vintage images is a way of suggesting the diluting properties of time, the notion that the women in the photographs really existed, in real time, in those rooms, in those clothes, at that specific moment, and were subject to almost exactly the same set of environmental and circumstantial stresses that contemporary women in the same industry are. As Boltanski implores us to distrust history, it is time itself rather than facts that are unsympathetic. Seen in sepia, we view these Victorian and Edwardian women as ‘Les Grandes Horizontales,’ or perhaps as Klimt’s lovers, the passage of time and what we think we know about the past allowing us to re-contextualise images in much the same way that numbers and statistics become psychologically misappropriated when they reference body counts during conflict.

Also on the machine guns are laminated images of individuals who hold a peripheral interest for me. These, like the other visual impulses are simply “thought barnacles,” totems of curiosity that are included because they are a part, albeit a minor part, of my conscious life; just as Hirschhorn’s work is only political because it is a reflection of his personality, which is political. These barnacles, which are constants throughout both sculptures, attach themselves to my work because they are always there as visual impulses which I attempt to use like a contemporary, random version of marginalia.

In ‘Not Knowing,’ the use of post-it-notes, which by definition are designed not to be overlooked, are intended to draw the viewer toward my marginalia which becomes more purposeful and explicit the further up the sculpture they travel. The main
portrait of me has post-it-notes photographed on my lapels, which read, "I saw a man have his head cut off and it's never bothered me." This refers to time that I spent in Rwanda and the question of whether it is voyeuristic dislocation that prevents such acts of violence from rotting an individual's mind, or simply a fundamental and essential lack of empathy and caring.

‘Not Knowing,’ and ‘Not knowing with Gusto,’ are both loosely defined deliberations on the act of violence. ‘Not Knowing,’ is a more explicitly biographical reflection but just as with ‘Not Knowing with Gusto,’ the application of the personal is another engagement device. The arbitrary nature of the post-it-notes and doodles reflect a general inability to focus, although not mine exclusively. It is my intention that an extended engagement should reconfigure a shared anxiety for a protracted period which will extend beyond the gallery. Questions should assemble in such a way that established, perhaps even ancestral thought patterns, are forced to give way to a more inclusive, compassionate and altruistic impulse.

The third horse form, ‘Speculation,’ has not been presented as a finished work for examination, although its as yet unresolved form exists photographically in the sketch books that are part of this research project. This piece differs from the other two in that there is an identifiably human form astride its haunches, one which is heavily pregnant. The horse is turned to face her and is licking the metal bucket which is covering her face. She is wearing a golden jacket which has the facsimile of a painting of St George slaying the dragon on its back. The image is specific to the church of St Mary of Zion in Axum, Ethiopia. The woman wears hugely exaggerated gauntlets which flow behind her.
Like the other two sculptures, this is a meditation on the taking of life and is intended to provoke a similar set of benign urges that establish questions that become formulated beyond the gallery space, questions which are free from social determinates or inherited prejudice. As with ‘Not Knowing’ and ‘Not Knowing with Gusto,’ ‘Speculation’ uses difficult imagery, in particular those of an aborted foetus. This work however is not ‘about’ abortion, and is not examining ‘the unfathomable and the unsolvable’ as Kienholz did in ‘The Illegal Operation.’ Instead the unborn child is just another strand of deliberation, but one which comes close to defining the kind of quandary which becomes contemporaneously locked into a theological and/or doctrinal convention which negates the need for personalised scrutiny. Buying into these conventions make the choices less weighty as independent thought becomes less necessary. When the issue of abortion is wrestled away from the ideological and the moral, the essentially speculative nature of the debate can allow for pragmatic, yet counter-intuitive decisions being reached.

The fact that in my survey of the problems surrounding an activist art practice I have alighted on Hirschhorn, who cannot be described as an activist, is indicative of just how difficult it is to produce sustainable change through the making of objects and also illustrates how far my methodology has travelled over the course of this research project. The multifarious forces that can inhibit and distort the reception of traditional issue-based works are radically reduced when they are tackling specific local concerns or events: Whether it is Haacke highlighting the pollution of the Rhine, Deller exposing hidden histories and corporate malignancy or Salcedo’s ‘Noviembre 6 y 7’ acting as a passion play in re-presenting tragedy. None of these works in any way cheapen that which they attempt to critique. Indeed they help to elucidate dialogue and do bring about localised change. Yet they are illustrations, just as ‘Big
Coffin' would have been. Due to the geographically parochial nature of the episodes they describe, the probability that events will be repeated, in another place, under slightly different conditions and circumstances, is inescapable.

Hirschhorn’s slow burn and his mirroring of the fraught, contradictory and anxious human condition, and Kienholz’s recalibration of questions which he presents from a distance, but with sufficient theatre as to make them unavoidable, offer a model which can be cultivated. I have attempted to do this while attempting to avoid the problems which dog the best of their works, which centre on the over-complexity of visual signifiers and the resultant disengagement that this can trigger. I have attempted to make an asset out of their ‘conceptual scatter gun approach,’ by reducing ‘concept’ to ‘thought barnacle,’ so that if an element is misconstrued, the piece continues to work meaningfully in the same way that an intermittent conversation can still lead to the crux of the matter. Unlike in ‘Ozymandias Parade,’ where the intimation overload succeeds even though its’ sub-text is lost, there are no subtexts in the works that I have presented for examination. It is not necessary to understand the medicinal qualities of a unicorn’s horn, or to have a working knowledge of the writings of Pliny. The viewer does not need to grasp the specific differences between Allen Lee Davis’ actions and those of Majid Kavousifar, or have any schooling in the festival of Thaipusam. These are all gestural beacons that I have followed in an attempt to describe confusion. In doing so I aim to foster internal insurrection by normalising chaos and lack of clear thought and to demonstrate the notion of choice through the breaking of the cycle of received wisdom and inherited knowledge. My objective is not to provide contextual continuity between the various visual impulses that adorn and inhabit the sculptures. To do so would risk an unintended and uncontrollable narrative sub-text.
The way that I have manipulated materials to create complex surfaces and ostentatious, theatrical forms is part of a process aimed at drawing the viewer into a sustained encounter that is seductive, enticing and confusing. This confusion is intended to be compelling as opposed to one which excludes. The objective of legitimising contradictory impulses and uncertainty is offered to the audience unimpeded by sub-texts. As activist pieces, they are intended to work by changing attitudes through the nurturing of independent thought as opposed to changing or solving or highlighting specific wrongs.
CHAPTER 7 NOTES


3. Ibid


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Conclusion

The writing of this thesis has led me to develop more structured analytical criteria when considering both the work of others and my own. This has allowed me to approach the investigative dissection of work in a more dispassionate, less intuitive way that breaks down the visual evaluative procedure into aim, response, method and then visual viability. This approach might appear an obvious structure when surveying most art within an academic environment. However this research project has been in part about rectifying issues that have surfaced within my own practice, as outlined in chapter 7. As stated in my introduction, this has not been an art historical exercise, rather an evaluative, interpretive and practical resolution based exercise concerned with the making activity, a process which does not lend itself readily to steely dispassionate analysis. This quandary can most often be witnessed in those works that become aestheticised as the processes and intuitive urges run away from the artist and distort the initial contextual intention. In achieving a critical structure which offers me inoculation against both the seductive and the superficial, I have been able to re-alibrate my own working methodology, one which now embraces the fluid and the intuitive as a device as opposed to an end. This in itself is at variance with my starting point. At the beginning of this research project I speculated that my practice, and the work into whose shadow it fell, was lacking connectivity through an absence of intuitive urgency and freedom.

My practice is now repositioned within the sphere of Thomas Hirschhorn's reconstruction of confusion and over-production, and Edward Kienholz's use both of spectacle and belligerent cross examination. My theoretical analysis has allowed me
to disentangle my response to their practice and to insert the need for a more intimate, introspective visual connection with the viewer in order to foster prolonged absorption and contextual assimilation. I have come to the view that this introspection can only take place if the viewer is not being talked at or preached to. Work which is, or even only appears to be propagandistic, fails because it either preaches to the converted as is the case within conventional art spaces, or melts away against a soup of visual agitprop when sited none-traditionally. There must be sufficient ambiguity to allow for an open cognition, but it should not be so open that the audience feels as if they are missing something and so become marginalised. The issue being explored should be less of a contention or a hypothesis, and more of a sense of something being discussed, evaluated and internally mulled over. It is the personal inflection, the biographical, the willingness of the artist to share a secret confusion that is intended to engender within the viewer an acceptance of independent oppositionality.

The best of Hirschhorn and Kienholz, which is when the work is confusing, absorbing and furthest from the propagandistic and when it comes close to describing the human condition, is empathetic and subliminally activist. Hirschhorn manages to find a route beyond the local, while at the same time retaining the work's biographical personality which in turn succeeds due to its audacity and implied profundity. The viewer understands the first-hand nature of the concerns being voiced, even notions which may differ from those of the onlooker; the empathetic connectivity still manages to create an atmosphere of solidarity. The subconscious complexities trigger engagement through the recognition of a shared fragility of the human intellect, activated by the soaking up and partial erasure of layers of opinion.
However, where Hirschhorn's approach fails, and what my own methodology seeks to rectify, is the marginalisation of the viewer majority and the deflection of meaning, even the meaning of not meaning. This happens through the clustering of layers and the over-complexity of different audience strata. Hirschhorn in this sense is too considerate, too anxious that there should be something for everyone which in the end leads to knowledge hierarchies.

Kienholz is more egalitarian, fitting easily within the furniture of a familiar transgressive orthodoxy. Never the less Kienholz's own labyrinthine complexities also entangle and dilute his work, although there is less meaning distortion due to the contextual continuity which remains approximate even during a misreading. The interpreter lingers within the same inexact orbit even when failing to connect with the spectacle. Unlike Hirschhorn however, Kienholz never confers independence on the viewer.

My response to these weaknesses within both Hirschhorn and Kienholz's practices has been to make objects that aim to engage and to licence uncertainty. The pretext being that an environment where those who hold with an independent rationality are less likely to inflict their vision on those who hold opinions with which they can also relate; or indeed may still hold as a part of an internal web of contradictory views or impulses. I am confident that the visual engagement devices that I have employed within the two piece that I have presented for examination, 'Not Knowing' and 'Not Knowing with Gusto,' both cultivate and amplify independent deliberation free from traditional allegiances. A next step however is to find a quicker production method, one which continues to expose the hand of the maker as being one of unanimity and
obligation. Casting lightweight multiples is an option with which I have begun experimenting. Mobility and the speed at which I can respond to the memoir of changing external events, both sociological and political, will be a test of the vitality of its engagement. This might mean the relinquishing of a key engagement device, which is craft, or the recognition of time spent and skills honed. The acceleration of visual riposte would have to counterbalance the relinquishing of a key absorption component in my practice. The rapidity of response would not however be an attempt to prospect or exploit the specific. Rather it would be a practical way of making more work, albeit with contemporary meaning inflections.

This project establishes the notion that there are two distinct ways of making activist art, neither of which is best suited to encouraging change. The first aims at a broad sweep of viewer engagement through denying any kind of specific contextual encumbrance that could divide participation. This is a type of work that is not tied to location as it is not distinguished by particular or precise context. It promotes an expansive far-reaching sense that moral infractions have occurred, but the necessity of its vagaries leave the precise nature of them opaque and unable to be acted upon. These kinds of works are often spectacular and have the feel of an essential and grave critique but are in fact amorphous in character and act only as liberal placebo.

The second method is unambiguous and exploits shared circumstances and concerns within highly concentrated environments. This work taps into received local knowledge and is often demonstrably effective in supporting and encouraging change. It guarantees that the viewer interprets the message accurately, directing the art at a specific target audience which is receptive to the reinforcement and
continuation of a 'campaign.' However, this kind of work is ultimately limited in scope and too concentrated to offer significant fundamental activation or engagement. To make work that is simply recognising current dialogue or disgruntlement creates the scenario where the artist becomes an illustrator as opposed to an instigator.

The making of art is no longer the most suitable medium to demonstrate existing injustices. Changes in technology and in particular the proliferation of mass media, citizen journalism, the sophistication of campaign organisations and the efficiency and credibility of investigative documentary making and the popular thirst for them, means that activist art in its traditional issue-based format is anachronistic, exclusive and comparatively limited. Even if we set aside the aesthetic and environmental fragilities that I have suggested in this thesis have distorting and blunting influences on activist art, the most urgent dereliction resides in the disjunct in momentum. If we compare the practices of galleries or designated art spaces that traditionally plan their exhibition schedules months and years in advance, with the new communication technologies, social networks, alternative media, crowd sourcing and politically motivated hacking, the firestorm of information that has twice provided revolutionary impetus in the first months of 2011, now renders art which sets out to imply instruction, no longer fit for purpose.

Art which seeks to activate change must now work within a larger subliminal superstructure. If it sails too close to documentary, the catch up of its illustrative impediments will expose its limitations. To reassert its relevance it must again exploit the sensual. To be heard over the din, it must look more like art, but adopt more Machiavellian methods.
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(1.Int) Ralph Darbyshire, *Not Knowing* 2010, mixed media, 230x250cm
(2.Int) Ralph Darbyshire  *Not knowing with Gusto*, 2010, mixed media 210x480cm
(3.Int) Ralph Darbyshire, detail from *Not Knowing*, 2010, mixed media
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ILLUSRATIONS FOR CHAPTER 7

(1.7) Ralph Darbyshire, *Red Hot and Dutch*, 2001, mixed media, dimensions variable

(2.7) Ralph Darbyshire, *Year__*, 1996, 99 photographs, 175x175cm, ceramic pots 175x175cm.
(5.7) Ralph Darbyshire, *A Man on the Road, Kasese to Kigali*, 1996. 4 box frames 23x23x20cm, wool

(6.7) Ralph Darbyshire *Clay Head* 2007 Crank Clay and Polyester Resin
(7.7) Ralph Darbyshire, Ceramic Components made from Crank clay

(8.7) Ralph Darbyshire, pencil sketch for *Big Coffin* project, 2006
(9.7) Ralph Darbyshire *Not Knowing with Gusto* 2010, mixed media, 210x480cm
(10.7) Ralph Darbyshire, detail from Not Knowing with Gusto 2010, mixed media
(11.7) Ralph Darbyshire, detail from *Not Knowing with Gusto* 2010, mixed media
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(13.7) Ralph Darbyshire, detail from *Not Knowing with Gusto* 2010, mixed media
(14.7) Ralph Darbyshire, detail from *Not Knowing with Gusto* 2010, mixed media
(15.7) Ralph Darbyshire, detail from *Not Knowing with Gusto* 2010, mixed media

(16.7) Ralph Darbyshire *Not Knowing* 2010, mixed media, 230x250cm
(17.7) Ralph Darbyshire, detail from Not Knowing 2010, mixed media
(18.7) Ralph Darbyshire, detail from *Not Knowing* 2010, mixed media
(19.7) Ralph Darbyshire, detail from Not Knowing. 2010, mixed media