

**ALL SCULPTURE** in the present seems to have acquired the condition of the book, to paraphrase Walter Pater: the status of total obsolescence, bordering on disappearance. Yet the features that both sculpture and the book once shared have now, on their loss, become all the more prominent: Made with material supports derived from natural resources (paper, wood, stone, metal), they communicated in very specific languages to specific audiences in national, if not regional, idioms— aspiring to occupy prominent places in what was once called the public sphere. To exacerbate the chasm that separates the present from that recent past, we could cite the most cogent definition of sculpture from the 1970s one more time: “The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic, a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place.”<sup>1</sup>

Since the 1960s, two sets of artistic strategies have programmatically deconstructed this seemingly guaranteed objecthood of sculpture. Combining the various legacies of John Cage and Fluxus, and mediated by those of Anna Halprin and Merce Cunningham, the first strain displaced sculptural objects by substituting them with actual performing bodies (from Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer to Judson Church, from Robert Morris and Bruce Nauman to Dan Graham). The second—and in many ways complementary—set of strategies operated on the level of linguistic, discursive, and architectural interventions, culminating in the critical deconstructive work of Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, and Lawrence Weiner. All these artists claimed that such performative actions could initiate immediate communicative relations between their practices and their spectators, and that they would thereby realize sculpture's ambition to generate conditions of simultaneous collective perception. This prospect seemed to justify an erasure of all the material, procedural, and perceptual distinctions— between subjects, objects, materials, and architectural and social spaces—that had defined sculpture until the mid-1960s.

Yet these practices also had to confront a number of newly emerging contradictions—facing, as they did, both the extreme consequences of post-Duchampian de-skilling and various versions of a documentary factographic aesthetic. In works ranging from, say, Haacke's *Visitors' Profiles* to Martha Rosler's *Monumental Garage Sale*, both begun in the early 1970s, spectators/readers might have wondered why they were still encountering the persistence of artistic production, after they had presumably acquired communicative immediacy, shared perception, and autonomy from artistic conventions and skills, myths and mastery. More crucially, perhaps, spectators could have rightfully queried why these interventions—even at their most critical—at best reflected only on the mere remnants of public space and residual collective experience, instead of expanding their horizons to address the primacy of the new technological and ideological mediations that were actually controlling public social space at the time (as suggested by the work of Dara Birnbaum, herself a former Halprin disciple).

By the 1990s, a number of sculptural and performative interventions had emerged that claimed to correspond to the expanded competencies—both discursive and linguistic—of their audiences (by artists ranging from Thomas Hirschhorn and Andrea Fraser to Tino Sehgal). Inevitably, though, these artists had to face (or avoid) the central question of how their sculptural, spatial, and performative structures might actually reflect on their own mediations of power within the fragments of a formerly public space. Put differently, they had to ask whether and how their radically reductivist and deconstructivist works could parry the transformative impact of the process of reception itself—the very moment when their works' own radicality became style, when subversive deconstruction became design, when critical performative gesture became mere theatrical stunt. At this threshold, one of the primary challenges was to reflect on precisely the degree to which these artists were now (in)voluntarily providing the compensatory supply side for the fashion system, the despotism of design, and the various apparatuses of domination by spectacle at large. (Recall, for example, the recent design of an opulent mass-ornamental fashion presentation for Marc Jacobs/Louis Vuitton by Daniel Buren, once the most articulate theoretician and practitioner of institutional critique.) Some, like Hirschhorn, engaged alternate audiences and spaces outside the privileged sphere of art, aspiring to achieve politically transformative modes of participation; others, like Sehgal, activated performers

themselves, while factographically registering the broader conditions of speech and reception in the world at large.

**AT FIRST GLANCE**, Anne Imhof's project for this year's Venice Biennale—the architectural design of the German pavilion and performance therein, titled *Faust*—seems to have emerged from a reflection on these legacies. But after some contemplation, certain features of Imhof's work alerted us to the particular delays and deformations, and major geopolitical differences, that have affected the European reception of post-Cagean performative strategies of the past fifty years. And one became even more aware of the degree to which the critical analysis of advanced forms of spectacularized consumption that now rule everyday collective perception differs between these generations. Until recently, it still seemed totally unthinkable for radical artists, from Asher to Fraser to Sehgal, to attempt to unify the spheres of art with the languages of corporate architecture, the fashion system, and industrial music production—yet all these fusions are obviously integral to Imhof's project.

The pavilion design appeared to have taken its primary inspiration not only from the display architectures of Germany's bank buildings but also from the gigantic shrine-like showrooms for the country's supreme fetish—the car—that surprise one on Frankfurt or Berlin's most elegant avenues (manifesting the extreme hierarchy of renewed social Darwinism mediated by collective consumption, as in Mercedes-Benz's current slogan: "The best or nothing"). And Imhof mobilized the apparently inexhaustible resources of that "culture," metallic and vitreous, for a mimetic architecture *parlante* (displaying utter indifference toward its production of massive industrial waste at a time of increasingly universal precarity) that culminated in a vast floor construction made of safety glass, akin to what Germans call *Panzerglas*: large plates of armored glass that protect banks from robbery and politicians from assault. As if mocking (if only she had) this newly enforced German hierarchical authoritarianism, propelled by the economic drive of its corporations, Imhof installed two large cages flanking either side of the pavilion's main entrance, featuring a posse of Doberman attack dogs aggressively barking at visitors.<sup>2</sup>

It was not immediately clear whether Imhof's cult of glass was trying to enact a late variation on Taut and Mies, and their Expressionist aspirations that total transparency would shift social relations from privacy to collective accessibility. Or whether she was wholeheartedly embracing corporate architecture's fascistic, massive glass deployments, which pretend to offer universal transparency but actually enforce total secrecy and control. Yet by shifting from the verticality of the corporate facade to the horizontality of the pavilion's floor, the work only perversely increased the disciplinary powers of glass. Imhof's decision to position spectators as involuntary performers, treading on this horizontal expanse of sculptural/architectural space, inevitably called for a comparison with other physical and discursive deconstructions of sculpture's traditional volume and verticality and its inversions into a literal plane: from Carl Andre's claim, still credible in the 1960s, to have reversed the phallic order of sculpture into a platform for walking, to Vito Acconci's transformation of the gallery floor into both a roof over his masturbation chamber and a platform under the audience in his sensational 1972 *Seedbed*, to Haacke's startling destruction of the entire marble floor, originally installed by Hitler, of the German pavilion in Venice in 1993, to name but a few.

In extreme contrast, Imhof's *Panzerglas* palace literally bared the latent sadism of both its design and its spectators, who suddenly found themselves—as in a terrarium—positioned above the performers, now subjected underfoot, below the glass floor, lounging, wiggling in gestures of erotic enticement, masturbatory come-ons, spent boredom, or huddling around various small fires.<sup>3</sup> In subsequent phases of the performance, which often continued over several hours,<sup>4</sup> some members of the underground assembly emerged above ground, with the evacuated facial expressions of proud zombies on a mission, sitting on elevated brushed-aluminum consoles like Apple store personnel run amok or on the pavilion's roof like live gargoyles, or striding in catwalk formations with militant menace through the dense crowds of gawking spectators.

A complex historical arc links Forti and Rainer's radical task-based performances, which voided choreographic mastery to endow common subjects with bodily and mental agency, to Sehgal's extreme evacuations of bodily or theatrical performance, which distill his practice nearly to an aesthetic of "bare life." Yet the extremes of Sehgal's artistic self-denial ultimately activate his spectators all the more, enabling them to acquire public agency and enact competencies of perceptual and communicative exchange. But what artistic mentality in the present would feel compelled to yield even these last forms of physiological, perceptual, and phenomenological self-determination to the totally regulated spaces and bodily imperatives of corporate control? Only the authentic banality of a fashion designer would want to recast these slightest behavioral fractures within the totalitarian forms of control and consumption, to turn even the most microscopic differences into yet another parasitical ready-made product, and to recoup—at the price of total spectacularization—the infinitesimal breaches that actual artistic practices open up, however slightly, within the firmament of control. Imhof and her partner, Eliza Douglas (who appears as the star performer both in the installation and in endless promotional photographs that might as well fill a minor musician's three-volume box set or the sample book of a modeling agency), have decided to invade these radically subversive and critical voids with the hypertrophic logic of collective narcissistic personality disorders, grafting the fashion industry's ever more voracious and desperate forms of compulsive self-affirmation onto the increasing despair of current artistic production (or vice versa).<sup>5</sup>

Imhof's collaborators and performers are presented as proudly serving volunteers, which explains the disturbing sense of being confronted once again—like Joseph Beuys's congregations of yore—with a German artist's youth cult of followers. As we know from Beuys (and Wagner before him), and as we see even more clearly with Imhof, the inherently submissive and compensatory dimensions of art as *cult*—utterly opposed, of course, by post-Cagean traditions of performativity—inevitably fail at any specific critical analysis of class, political economy, or the actual conditions of audiences' everyday experience. Worse yet, cultic structures will always guarantee extremely limited forms of communication, arresting an artwork within the very circuits of power and adulation on which its histrionic, simulated deviancy depends. Even the utterly preposterous title *Faust* (would that it were parody rather than pretense), associating this cabaret with the foundational text of a specifically German literary history and identity (ranging from the medieval puppet play to Goethe's *Faust* and Mann's *Doctor Faustus*), had prefigurations in Beuys's claims to position himself within a lineage of classical literature, as for example in his 1969 performance fusing Goethe's *Iphigenia* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Once again, it is this particular German lineage, from Wagner via Beuys to Imhof, that denies the fact that being contemporary means being committed to the utter privation, if not depravity, of one's classical cultural foundations, and that no pretended or imaginary bond can compensate for the poverty of cultural practices in the present.

Such phantasmagoric "communities of the future"—now forged by the fusion of club and catwalk (a sanitized version of Berlin's notorious Berghain)—stage these youth cults, attired in the latest melancholic fashion, as a narcissistic delusion of social redemption, of having escaped one more time, if only by a hair, from the vulgarity of daily life. (Adorno's prognosis "Fun is a bath in steel" [*Funist ein Stahlbad*] comes to mind.) By contrast, if one hoped that even the slightest effects of enlightenment, of resistance against the ruling proto-totalitarian powers, could still be induced by any sculptural intervention within the residual forms of public space, it would be precisely the result of fragmentation, not fusion: those decisive artistic capacities that fracture the relations between individual and collective even further, that begin to differentiate subject and object into utterly irreconcilable oppositions, that polarize experience and representation—opening increasingly unbridgeable chasms between linguistic, sculptural, and architectural operations and the existing sociopolitical and ideological totalities within which these forms of artistic production can barely occur.

**NOTHING COULD HAVE BEEN** further from the pomposity of the German pavilion's fusion of cult and corporate design than Mark Bradford's project for the American pavilion, *Tomorrow Is Another Day*. In stark contrast to Imhof's foreboding glass palace and dog cages, Bradford's

accumulation of detritus at the dilapidated entrance of his installation appeared accidental, an authentic record of the conditions of American urban public space, where sheer neglect both defines and afflicts its inhabitants, as subjects of consumption and as objects of abandonment.<sup>6</sup> Inside, a large sculptural structure, *Spoiled Foot*, 2016, recorded an infinity of traumatic impressions. Ominously suspended like a collapsed ceiling into the viewing space, the work obstructed viewers' passage into the domed area of the Palladian pavilion. But in lieu of the cupola's promise of a celestial ascent, Bradford inverted its spatial orientation and instilled the vertigo of a spiraling abyss, immediately followed—as in a one-two punch—by a monstrous structure, appropriately titled *Medusa*, 2016. Made from the unlikely sculptural materials of black paper, rope, and caulk, and seeming to have been haphazardly dragged through bleach, the work resuscitated and reformulated one of the most striking paradigms of post-Minimal sculpture: Eva Hesse's short-circuiting of somatic and social trauma. Bradford cited Hesse's unheard-of sculptural materials and morphologies, transposing all elements dead center into a reflection of the horrors of present-day racism and gender violence. One of the greatest critical challenges in responding to the seduction of Bradford's pavilion was, in fact, to resist the temptation to essentialize—partly the result of Bradford's own incessant foregrounding of the psychosocial and sexual terms of his work (working-class, black, gay, LA). After all, we would not want to engage in a solely biographic interpretation, nor in the discursive construction of a new outsider exceptionalism, and least of all in a new urban primitivism that draws on the retransmission of obsolete painterly and sculptural practices.<sup>7</sup>

This challenge extended to Bradford's series of paintings for the pavilion, which shared the room with *Medusa* (significantly, all had titles from Greek mythology, as though the darkest dimensions of myth had indeed returned to haunt us). One of their primary material resources was the particular type of "endpapers" that the artist formerly used by the hundreds, if not the thousands, to process female customers' hair at his mother's salon in LA. Literally redeemed from their bodily and utilitarian services, they appeared elevated to new pictorial heights as serially collaged and painted grisaille units. In a sublime mimicry of late-modernist abstraction, they also seemed to pay tribute to one of Bradford's female idols, the great Agnes Martin, whose meditative abstractions emerged in manifest opposition to the masculinist reign of Abstract Expressionist painters in the late 1950s. But more important, in an inversion of this process of abstraction as sublimation, Bradford's paintings also desublimated abstraction, endowing it with an exemplary, public, mnemonic record of labor—that of Bradford's mother and that of the artist himself. A second type of paper comprises an equally essential resource for Bradford's practice: bulks and bundles of found or vandalized posters the artist collects with his assistants from the streets of his South LA neighborhood. Featured in *Spoiled Foot*, for example, such detritus was also echoed in slightly earlier paintings (including *Tomorrow Is Another Day*, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and *105194*, all 2016), which take as their support industrially produced, standardized, monochromatic sheets of paper called "blanks," typically used for posters. But Bradford has also referred to the use of blanks in Europe, where they were often used to *cover up* political posters or unwanted signs on the street. Once liquefied and modeled into bulbous layers of pulp on the surfaces of the paintings, they are sanded down, built up, then sanded again to generate an uncannily somatic texture, a kind of urban derma disseminated across these large paintings as though the artist were charting a vague memory of Debord's psychogeographic maps.

These cartographic works appeal through their initially bewildering resuscitation of a long-overlooked, if not totally disavowed, neo-avant-garde procedure—the *décollages* of Jacques Villeglé and Raymond Hains.<sup>8</sup> At a moment of extreme global dislocation and universal homogeneity, if not outright identity, of architectures and publics, the very recollection of a moment when artists could convincingly claim to resist the emerging mass-cultural powers—in aggressive gestures of defacement and protest against the growing dismemberment of public space—must now appear as a mnemonic mecca. Bradford's works provide a map of that memory from the heart of LA, the globalized and decentered city par excellence, an irresistible charting of the past. But the extraordinary and seductive materiality of these works also seems to address the fact that paper, like painting itself, is of course the very material that is rapidly withering away from all advanced forms of communication in our dark digital age. Be it Bradford's large suspended ceiling, the reversed abyss of the cupola, the papered and

tarred tangles of his fusion of Laocoön and Medusa, or the urban pauper's posters, all generate a peculiar fascination with fragility from which one cannot easily withdraw. We thus encounter, perhaps for the first time, not just a fetishization of objects and materials but the collective fetishization of an entire support system of communicative production.

The last, and possibly most compelling, element in Bradford's pavilion was his video projection *Niagara*, 2005, which shows, from behind, a young black man in bright yellow shorts ambling down a nondescript, dilapidated LA street in ostentatious nonchalance, either in an unconscious innervation of Marilyn Monroe's walk in the famous scene of the work's namesake 1953 film or in a brazen mockery of the scene's camp status among (black) gay men. But *Niagara* was also, of course, the name of the group of antisegregationists, including W. E. B. Du Bois, who gathered on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls in 1905 to discuss the future politics of African American emancipation. Complementing the title's uncanny, deeply discomfiting phonetic reverberations, Bradford triggers a cathartic confrontation: between his protagonist's bodily gestures of disobedience and the deep imprint of mass-cultural control left on all its subjects. It is precisely this glimpse of a collectively available possibility of resistance that Bradford's anonymous and unskilled performer allows (in stark contrast, again, to Imhof's chosen crew), and that transfers and intensifies the egalitarian radicality of Judson Church into an oppositional activism in the present.

Bradford's sculptural and pictorial production has, in fact, long been paralleled by social activism. In Venice, the artist presented one such project alongside the pavilion: his engagement with the prison merchant collective Rio Terà dei Pensieri, a cooperative for men and women in the Venetian prison system that provides basic forms of work training and teaches methods of economic self-sustainment in an effort to prepare inmates for eventual resocialization, and which Bradford will continue to support for six years. This expansion of the parameters of sculpture and social activism brings us back to some of the questions we had asked initially—namely, to what extent the practice of sculpture must fracture its former morphological and material homogeneity into discontinuous activities, in order to credibly claim that sculpture can still initiate some form of social agency.<sup>9</sup>

**PERHAPS THE MOST HAUNTING** and complex challenge to claims that sculpture could reconstitute emancipated models of experience in the public sphere was Pierre Huyghe's *After ALife Ahead*, 2017, the artist's contribution to Kasper König's Skulptur Projekte Münster. This decennial, now in its fifth and probably final iteration, was staged in the protected zones of a middle-class town that can still sustain the myths of a potential abolition of social and spatial divisions in public space. Rather than building a new glass palace, Huyghe excavated a defunct entertainment venue, the town's former ice-skating and hockey rink. Abandoned due to its relatively modest size and its lack of media technologies, the arena was available for the artist to transform into the site of a fundamentally dystopian, if not apocalyptic, archaeology.

*After ALife Ahead* programmatically synthesizes seemingly incompatible strands of sculptural histories: Land art, in particular the work of Robert Smithson; Haacke's systems-theory sculptures, developed in dialogue with Jack Burnham; the mid- to late-'60s institutional critique of Buren.<sup>10</sup> Yet, commenting on his relation to Smithson, Huyghe has stated, "My interest was not in creating an object that escapes the exhibition frame only to merge with the landscape in its scale, but to do this more in a temporal sense. It would no longer be something in the middle of nowhere, no longer subject to this fascination of the Earth artists with the empty desert. My work would be precisely *in-between* the city and nature, *in-between* this place of meetings, signs, and corporations, which is the city, and nature."<sup>11</sup> Thus it is not only historical distance that distinguishes Huyghe from the practices of the 1960s, but his reconfiguration of these earlier strategies into the dialectical counternarratives needed in the present, at the moment of sculpture's inevitable submission to technologically mediated spectacle.

If Huyghe recognized that Smithson and Land art aimed to reposition artistic practices outside the

parameters of discursive and institutional control—i.e., in total disregard of the museum and gallery—by situating the work in the no-man’s-lands of abandoned industrial sites, he has now powerfully foregrounded the inevitable, simultaneous coexistence of these spatially, materially, and temporally heterogeneous conditions within the institutional parameters of the exhibition itself. The same applies to Huyghe’s citations of Haacke’s approach: While for Haacke systems theory could still marshal a critical and rationalist Enlightenment culture in order to displace transhistorical artistic myths by positivist truth value, Huyghe’s dystopian displays of interconnected social, biological, and physical systems appear as the technologically mediated stages on which the imminent relapse of enlightenment into myth and ecological catastrophe can be most dramatically performed. It is precisely this acknowledgment—that sculptural claims for a space of critical rationality outside the totalization of spectacle can no longer be sustained—that defines Huyghe’s epistemology, once again departing from his rationalist Marxist predecessors of the 1960s. Thus he states:

*We must dispel one received idea and that is that the spectacle is a fatalism, inherently alienating. The spectacle is a format, it is a way to do things. . . . The point is not as an artist to occupy the position of simply rejecting the spectacle or entertainment as bad; this is a form of escapism. Nor is the point just to incorporate spectacle, and occupy the position of an artist saying, “I will also just be an entertainer.” The point is to take spectacle as a format, and to use it if the need presents itself.<sup>12</sup>*

Huyghe’s variations on Land art strategies, and his deconstruction of sculpture’s universal base, the earth, never merely spectacularize their intervention in heretofore unimagined sites and scales. Indeed, even the artist’s destructive incisions into the surfaces of the Münster ice rink and its grounds nevertheless followed the rationalist principles of a mathematical puzzle suggested by Archimedes, the *Stomachion*, according to which a spatial form is fragmented and then reconstituted in varying permutations, as in a tangram. Digging deeply underneath cuts into the rink’s floor while leaving other segments of the surface intact, the sculpted space revealed layers of groundwater, sand, and clay, some of them even traceable to the geologic deposits of the last prehistoric movements of glaciers in this Westphalian region. Several mounds of earth and clay were subsequently formed into towerlike structures to house two populations of bees, which also contain sensors recording the movements and activities of the bee population itself. As in a common surveillance system, information is collected about the biosphere’s interlocking living and material elements; the sensors are connected by buried cables to a cancer-cell incubator, an obdurate form that appeared like an uncanny refrigeration unit resting on the banks of the massive pit. The data is processed using a set of algorithms that can accelerate or slow the multiplication of the cancer cells. These, in turn, trigger an app that spectators can download, displaying on one’s phone screen mysterious geometric forms that move in response to the activity of the cancer cells. Another natural pattern likewise determines the opening of massive apertures in the roof, mechanized geometric panels that automatically open and close without any apparent logic. In this way, an entire universe of the microscopic and macroscopic, mechanical and organic, real and virtual, shifts according to the frequencies of bodily movements and vital signs emerging from the setting at large, as if to compel spectators’ insight into the utter interdependence and continuous exchange between the normal and the pathological forms of contemporary everyday life.

These vast biological systems, and the startling presence of live animals (not only bees but chimera peacocks, fish, algae), continue Huyghe’s interrogation of traditional conceptions of sculpture via such flora and fauna, most notoriously used in his project *Untilled*, 2011–12, for Documenta 13 in 2012, which featured the enchanting presence of two *Podenco Ibicenco* dogs and a beehive. And unlike the long list of postwar artists who have used live animals in their work—some of whom, like Haacke, deployed these strategies as scientific investigations of biological systems, while others, like Kounellis, returned to a melancholic desire for a reconciliation of nature and culture—Huyghe deploys his strange animal husbandry to “deregulate” the relations between subjects, spaces, and systems, not only recording the violence with which the subject’s mnemonic capacities have been destroyed by spectacle but charting how the melancholic gaze itself now returns that violence by converting its representations into a future altogether bereft of subjective agency.<sup>1</sup>

Commenting on his decision to incorporate live creatures in the new work, Huyghe gave an explanation that was as plausible as it was lapidary: “Animals are determined both by reproduction, a necessity, and by aleatory forms of unpredictable behavior; that interests me indeed.”<sup>14</sup> A difficult question emerges, however, in response to Huyghe’s laconic answer: To what extent might his substitution of animals for human performers be read as an increasingly skeptical reflection on the legacies of Cage? After all, posing animals as “aleatory forms of unpredictable behavior” would seem a dark twist indeed on Cage’s utopian vision of the aleatory as a means of liberation from the rationalization of the human subject; and an equally dark reflection on the human actors in the performative sculptures and “situations” of Sehgal, Hirschhorn, and even Philippe Parreno, who has similarly used microorganisms to trigger complex systems of effects.

If Huyghe is indeed critiquing Cage’s politics of desubjectivization, he also seems to be resuscitating a complex, lesser-known philosophical genealogy of proto-structuralist thought. Formulated in the first decade of the twentieth century, this strain complemented an emerging semiology, derived from structural linguistics and formalist literary theory, with a theory of signification derived from the natural sciences. Three figures (with almost identical life spans) drew on the observations and typologies of modern biology, in particular, to contribute key works in this history: the late Symbolist poet and dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949), who authored the cult books *The Life of the Bee* (1901) and *The Intelligence of Flowers* (1907), D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson (1860–1948), who wrote the 1917 *On Growth and Form* (which had served as a crucial reference for earlier artistic attempts to synthesize the legacies of Duchamp with a scientifically based structuralist model, becoming the central reference for Richard Hamilton and the Independent Group in the 1950s; in his Münster work, Huyghe cites Thompson almost verbatim when he uses the structural design of a seashell to serve as the basis for a musical score to be amplified throughout the work), and Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944), whose bio-semiology, formulated in his *Theoretical Biology* of 1920, had a tremendous impact on Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben, two of the most important contemporary philosophers in Huyghe’s intellectual formation. Huyghe’s substitution of animal actors for human ones opens onto a veritable semiology of forms, organisms, and structures that confront this history of nature, systems, and biopower.

While there is no doubt that such materialist structuralist models of signification formed an important counterpart to the linguistic structuralist semiology at the center of French theories of the ’60s, their invocation in Huyghe’s work leaves us with the question as to what agency—if any—a fully overdetermined and controlled natural environment, as an insurmountable limit of human behavior, might still permit. Thus the work’s strikingly schismatic temporality, even evident in the title *After A Life Ahead*, signals the total suspension of human agency: what Huyghe rightfully, yet resignedly, calls the “anthropophagy” of contemporary conditions.

**IF FIGURES OF POLITICAL AGENCY**—and any sense of resistant oppositionality or self-determination—seemed utterly absent from Huyghe’s diorama, as though we had already accepted the Anthropocene’s final destruction of rationalist Enlightenment culture and ecology, figures did in fact still appear in Hito Steyerl’s Münster installation *Hell Yeah We Fuck Die*, 2016 (the title featuring the terms most frequently used in English song titles since 2010, according to *Billboard* magazine). One even encountered structures that could still be taken for traditional sculpture in the first room of Steyerl’s installation, appropriately situated in a rather pompous bank building from the 1970s featuring a collection of decorations by Düsseldorf Zero.

But these figures were robots, at least at first sight. The artist presented two humanoid models—one upright, one splayed on the floor—decomposed into stereometric cubic forms, uncannily cut from foam rubber rather than metal, literal software androids that could be seen as Minimalist revenants or isotypes for a neo-Productivist future. After this missed encounter with the recent sculptural past, one entered a second space with sampled, commercially produced videos that documented high-tech robotic figures, performing all the activities that contemporary technology suggests: marching, fighting, falling, and being beaten (one realized, with slightly bewildered amusement, that now even

robots face a future of a daily routine of violently disciplinary, if not military, aggression). In the long and extremely contradictory iconography of mechanomorph figures in the twentieth-century avant-gardes, from Brancusi to de Chirico, Schlemmer to Bellmer, either machinic men had triumphantly announced the collectivization of the industrial workforce or tailor's dummies had melancholically deplored the inevitably fetishistic features of reified patriarchal bourgeois subjectivity. Steyerl's electronically enhanced robotic subjects added a whole new category to this collection of sculptural tropes, presenting the grotesquely proto-totalitarian figures of a future of digital desubjectivation.

Yet in a second video projection, suddenly shifting from near-comedic sampling to the factographic mode of the documentarian, Steyerl took spectators to the city of Diyarbakır in southeastern Turkey, where, around 1205, the Kurdish writer and thinker Al-Jazari invented a range of machines and mechanical toys now known to us as automata. But the memory of this figure and his astonishing drawings had to literally confront the rubble of history, since Turkish military forces had recently bombarded the city in their genocidal attack on the Kurds, as we learn from the artist's interviews with local residents, archaeologists, and researchers. Facing the seemingly impenetrable apparatus of technological and ideological powers in the present, Steyerl inverts the resulting media pessimism in a Brechtian dialectical move. She addresses these anonymous powers with a child's voice, querying Siri (our omniscient oracle): "Who destroyed this city?"; "What role does computer technology play in war?"; and, finally, whether militaristic deployments would really have to be the sole future of robot technology or whether robots could also serve productively and concretely in the removal of land mines, for example.

Thus Steyerl provides evidence of the potential political effect that a sudden release of precise historical information—sculpture as a technologically mediated mnemonic jolt—can have on contemporary spectators. Here, the jolt not only catalyzed a spectrum of diverse, repressed factors defining our current political realities, it even linked them in sudden, unexpected constellations. The first of these, particularly relevant for German and Turkish audiences in Germany right now, triggered further reflections on the treatment of the Kurdish independence movement by the increasingly autocratic Erdoğan government. The second, no less pertinent but more global in nature, not only confronted its audiences with more specific evidence of the extraordinary complexities of Islamic culture—past and present—but also alerted us to the ever-mounting Islamophobia in the West. The particular communicative functions of Steyerl's project emerged from its capacity to directly address an array of intertwined racist, ideological, and political prejudices, enhanced and enforced by the delusions of a ruling technocratic triumphalism, in its audience. Every spectator, whether local, regional, or international, could instantly grasp the implications of contemporary Islamophobia (their own and that of others), as much as they could critically reflect on their own delusions about the supposed progress of the digital age. The precision of these communicative exchanges, confronting all the facets of the spectator's own ideological delusions, constituted an actual sculptural "public sphere," operating in a manner that could not have been further from the cult aesthetic that ruled Imhof's pavilion, whose primary audiences would never transcend the solipsism of self-enamored, privileged white middle classes in decline.

**TWO MAJOR WORKS** at Documenta 14 in Kassel (otherwise not exactly a wonderland of new sculptural achievements) substantiate our speculative metaphoric equation between the crisis of public sculpture and the crisis of the book. The first, as gigantic as a Christo and just as easily forgotten, instantly became (and was undoubtedly intended to be) the exhibition's incessantly photographed logo. Marta Minujín's assemblage of collected books that have at one time or another, in various places, been censored by religious, political, or ideological prohibitions were used to form the facades of a mock Parthenon. When the work was first installed in Buenos Aires in 1983, after the abolition of the Argentinean Catholic-fascist junta, this celebratory retrieval of banned books undoubtedly contributed to an experience of public redemption and recollection. In its current reconstruction, however, soliciting token participation from audiences in Kassel, who are asked to contribute formerly banned books from any historical context, the piece seemed gratuitous, its size and scale spectacular, inflated to provide a compensatory myth of criticality while failing to address in



any specific way our current conditions of readerly desublimation and the destruction of the public sphere.

Likewise building a structural and sculptural wall of books—yet in extreme contrast to Minujín’s spectacle—Maria Eichhorn’s *Rose Valland Institute* equally reflected on the intersections of public space, sculpture, and the printed word. And, of course, the concept of a public sculpture in the form of a library, or a library as public sculpture, already has a complex history.<sup>15</sup> After all, the particular materiality, textuality, and near-universal accessibility of the book still transcends the comparatively limited public scope of sculptural objects (the legacies of Duchamp’s inevitably fetishizing readymades) and architectures of spectacular consumption. If, in the late ’60s, Lawrence Weiner had responded to his Minimalist friend Andre by suggesting that sculptural interventions should become primarily linguistic ones, sculpture has, ever since, faced the question of whether its public presentation and distribution would be the book or the brick—and whether sculpture would continue to situate its spectators within the simulation of an architectural public sphere or within the actually accessible registers of printed language and its withering forms of distribution.

What makes Eichhorn’s library specific to the current moment of culture in Germany and to the site of the exhibition, however, is the fact that all the books stacked on her eighteen-foot-high shelves were stolen from the libraries of their original owners, the Jewish population of Berlin. [Subsequently, in the early 1940s](#), the Berlin City Library acquired these books from the city’s pawnshops, where they had been accumulated after their theft. Thus *Rose Valland Institute*—named after the curator of the Jeu de Paume in Paris who risked her life to register all the information about the stolen property, temporarily stored at the museum before being taken to Nazi Germany, of the city’s Jewish citizens—claims as its mission, and that of its spectators, to contribute to the continuing process of recuperation and restitution of all properties to their original owners and their relatives. And though the institute was founded for its presentation at Documenta 14, it will continue its activities after the exhibition ends.

Eichhorn follows the precedent of the provenance research that Haacke famously initiated in works such as *Manet—PROJEKT ’74*, or *Seurat’s “Les Poseuses” (Small Version), 1888–1975*, to trace the inextricable and inexhaustible histories of the documents of culture and barbarism in the first half of the twentieth century under the conditions of fascist and racist persecution. What distinguishes Eichhorn’s project from Haacke’s, however, is that she has moved from the tracing of painterly masterpieces to analyzing the largely ephemeral accumulations of vernacular books, whose actual current monetary value is in fact mostly negligible. But it is precisely this shift from stolen masterpieces to the relative banality of the stolen books that endows Eichhorn’s astonishingly detailed and precise research with all the more impact and insight, succinctly defining what the work of mnemonic agency initiated by cultural practices can actually achieve. Not only does the vast quantity of confiscated books, and the collective failure to return them to their original and legal owners, remind us of the extremely delayed processes of restitution, for which certain museums in Germany have become rightfully infamous, but the books also direct our attention to the fact that racist persecution operated in tandem with a purely economically motivated criminality, which the Nazi regime inflicted on the everyday life of German Jewish citizens.<sup>16</sup>

Thus Eichhorn’s work proves, on several levels, what a sculptural intervention can still enact today, even if we have to assume that the traditional forms of communication originating from the public sphere have been destroyed. First of all, the artist strikingly reactivates and redefines concepts of site specificity, concretized in this work by the most detailed accounts of auctions of Jewish property in Kassel (especially that of the collection of one of its great cultural patrons, Alexander Fiorino) and Berlin. And additional shocks of insight are generated not only by the extensively documented loss of works of art but by the murderous mania with which even the most banal household items were listed and registered along with the pittances they achieved as lots for sale. While one might wonder whether the extremely enlarged projection of these documents endow Eichhorn’s work with an overbearing monumentality, one recognizes, on reflection, that it is precisely this intensity of

mnemonic reconstruction that present-day generations might need most urgently, when they increasingly claim to have sufficiently studied the motivations for the politics of racism and fascism in the past.

This sense of inverted proportions—between the seeming banality of these objects of destroyed lives and the current apathy toward the urgency of critical analysis in the present—might engage its readers in a continuing reflection not only on the histories of the victims of German Nazi persecution, but on the actual motivations for fascism's renewed resources and motivations.

*Documenta 14 is on view in Kassel through September 17; Skulptur Projekte Münster is on view through October 1; the Fifty-Seventh Venice Biennale is on view through November 26.*

*Benjamin H. D. Buchloh is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Modern Art at Harvard University. Visit our archive at [artforum.com/inprint](http://artforum.com/inprint) for past coverage of the Venice Biennale, Skulptur Projekte Münster, and Documenta.*

*My title actually cites the title of a work by Lawrence Weiner in homage, so to speak, since his work has consistently, and over many years, challenged and furthered our thinking about the nature and functions of sculpture in the present.*

1. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 33.
2. The comparison set of sculptural installations deploying live animals is too large to introduce here, but even the shortest reference would yield a rather astonishing distinction for the animal heraldry in Imhof's projects. The artist used hunting falcons in her three-part opera *Angst*, which was presented in Basel, Berlin, and Montreal in 2016—rather masculinist if not proto-fascist animals in comparison, for example, with Jannis Kounellis's parrot sitting on its perch in an untitled sculpture in 1967. Or, closer to home, even Beuys's interactions with a trained coyote in his notorious installation *I like America and America likes me*, 1974, at the René Block Gallery in New York seem collaborative and cognizant of the animal's interactions when considered next to Imhof's display of incarcerated military-assault watchdogs.
3. Should it really be necessary to explain the fundamental differences between Acconci's genius in *Seedbed* and Imhof's subjection of her cohort of performing groupies, one might begin by underlining the fact that, in the former, Acconci subjected himself to invisibility within the sculpture's subterranean space, thereby further discomfiting scopically deprived spectators by exposing them to their own projections and speculations concerning the origin of the artist's primal noises, erupting underground. By contrast, Imhof's zombie actors were helplessly subjected to the cell-phone commands of the artist and the prurience of the spectators above. One might also remember that the public exposure of extremely private situations has other precursors, such as Chris Burden's *Doomed*, performed in 1975. The artist exhibited himself lying in complete stillness under a sheet of glass for the duration of his exhibition, once again taking it on himself (rather than forcing others) to expose the intimacy of his daily (non)life to public surveillance. Not surprisingly, the trajectory leading to Imhof's own spectacularized public exposure of living human creatures under glass can be traced instead to the actress Tilda Swinton, who contributed a sensationalized version of public slumber in a glass coffin as part of Cornelia Parker's 1995 retrospective at London's Serpentine Gallery. Later, in 2013–14, Swinton repeated the "performance" to great acclaim at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, tantalizing viewers with the promise to fulfill their deepest wishes regarding the ultimate specular fetishization: the star as live corpse.
4. After all, the work initially claimed to be an installation that would run for the duration of the Biennale, in the manner of a sculptural environment for performances, but it actually turned out to be a limited spectacle for the privileged members of the international art world who could attend the cabaret during the first three days of the preview. Afterward, the full performance, like any repertory opera, was relegated to about a dozen performances to be staged throughout the summer until the end of the Biennale in November (even though limited versions take place every day). These temporal limitations would not be cause for objection were it not for Imhof's claims to have synthesized all the disciplinary and discursive borders that had previously separated sculpture from architecture, objects from spaces, performers from spectators and from sculptural structures, and to have established the parameters of a new artistic medium and practice: the successful synthesis of a new Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

5. In this case, the mutual infatuation of both spheres (the fashion and art industries) seems to have come to fruition, since Douglas is now also one of Balenciaga's top models, while Imhof almost constantly presented herself in public during the Biennale sporting a Balenciaga baseball cap. If only we could return to Beuys's fucked-up fedora.
6. Bradford's irreverent entry even succeeded in provoking the protest of Trump's newly appointed ambassador to Italy, who was obliged to inaugurate the artist's overtly disturbing display.
7. Bradford himself has stated, "I sometimes wish my work weren't so autobiographical. But it is." Quoted in Katy Siegel, "Biography of a Painting," in *Mark Bradford: Tomorrow Is Another Day*, ed. Katy Siegel and Christopher Bedford, exh. cat. (New York: Gregory R. Miller, 2017), 48.
8. However, there was an earlier reception of this lineage, of which the exhibition-catalogue authors seem to have been unaware. See, for example, my extensive discussion of *décollage* in my essay "Formalism and Historicity," in *Europe in the Seventies: Aspects of Recent Art*, ed. Anne Rorimer (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1977), 83–111; and my later essay "From Detail to Fragment: *Décollage Affichiste*," in *October* 56, "High/Low: Art and Mass Culture" (Spring 1991): 98–110.
9. Such a project seems to attempt to go beyond mere token commitments to proletarian audiences, aiming to define standards altogether different from what an aesthetic of participation and site specificity might have initially imagined, in their efforts to endow the discipline of object and monument production with the dimensions that Beuys once defined as "social sculpture." Suspended between the Scylla of art's function as the speculative investment of global surplus value (and occasional philanthropic generosity) and the Charybdis of art's extremely limited social and political efficacy—the paradox of the agitprop fusion of privileged artistic agency, on the one hand, and dispossessed audiences, on the other—Bradford's separation of these contradictory spheres poses one contemporary answer to the inevitable fracturing of sculpture's material and procedural homogeneity.
10. Queried about the role of the imaginary in his work, Huyghe answers: "As a stance on the world, a war between different senses of the imaginary. It is necessary and wild. With his visual tool, Daniel Buren raises for discussion the functions of space and gives back its physicality, its spatiality. He opens it to itself—that's what it is, just in a different way." See Marie-France Rafael, *Pierre Huyghe: On Site*, trans. John Beeson (Cologne: Walther König, 2013), 58.
11. George Baker, "An Interview with Pierre Huyghe," *October* 110 (Autumn 2004): 82.
12. *Ibid.*, 104.
13. Confronting the list of possible comparisons—even if briefly—might not only put the seeming eccentricity of Huyghe's "animal husbandry" in context but allow us to recognize the specific differences he develops in the deployment of these live, performative, sculptural, yet nonhuman complements: Among these are Richard Serra's exhibition of a live chicken and pigs at his first solo exhibition in Rome at Galleria La Salita in 1966; Haacke's *Live Airborne System*, 1968; what is possibly the most notorious of works incorporating live animals, Kounellis's exhibition "*Senza Titolo (12 Cavalli)*" (Untitled [12 Horses]) at Fabio Sargentini's Galleria L'Attico in Rome in 1969; and, more recently, Bruce Nauman's *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)*, 2001, which recorded the nightly invasion and movements of desert rats in Nauman's rural studio, similarly posing an inherent critique of Cage's historical optimism.
14. Pierre Huyghe in conversation with Kolja Reichert, "*Was sich der Kontrolle entzieht*," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, June 11, 2017, 55.
15. A history of sculpture as a library, or the library as an antimemorial architecture of spectatorial and readerly agency, would have to begin with the workers' reading room of Aleksandr Rodchenko's *Workers' Club* in Paris in 1925 and could lead up to many examples in the recent past, from Thomas Hirschhorn's libraries in the *Bataille Monument* in Kassel, 2002, or his *24H Foucault* in Paris, 2004, to the *Martha Rosler Library* in New York and Frankfurt in 2006.
16. Götz Aly was one of the first historians to have foregrounded that not only violent racism but also extreme forms of criminal greed motivated the average German population of the 1930s in its destruction of Jewish households and businesses. See, for example, his chapter "*Die Nutzniesser des Mordens*," in Aly, *Volk ohne Mitte* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2015), 84–115; and, more generally, his *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2005).