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Art as Open Practice. One of modernity's consequences is the aesthetic reflection upon its own nature; in other words, the critique of modernity is an integral part of modernity itself. In its striving for transparency under rationality and the terms of the European enlightenment, modernity continuously feels the need to justify itself. Hence, novelty for its own sake is less a characteristic of modernity than is the radical reflexivity which ceaselessly revises the conventions and agreements regarding the nature of art and modernity.

Indeed, with the advent of modernity, reflexivity takes on a new character. It does not help to stabilize the concept of art, as is often hoped for or expected, but rather contributes to its instability and uncertainty.

The 1960s mark the advent of the modern world's critical discussion of its hegemonic role in relation to the Third world. For the first time, the First world tried to assume the perspective and point of view of the Third world. The reflexivity of modernity was broadening its historical and geographical horizons beyond the western world into the former colonies (from Algeria to Vietnam). The concept of modernity itself was seen

Translation
Julia Scheffer

as a part of European expansion; the export of modernity and its globalization thus corresponded with its inner nature. The system of modernity therefore began to be critically analyzed in order to free European art from its colonial condition. Modernity began to be de-colonized.

This de-colonization was not merely a literary one; it also took place on the level of aesthetic material and production. Arte Povera, for example, was first understood as guerilla-art due to its impoverished materials. Gordon Matta-Clark's urban interventions, too, can be understood as part of this process of decolonization. A critique of the museum as "white cube" (Brian O'Doherty, 1976) evolved. The museum was charged with dismissing all gender, social and ethnic differences and privileging a European and North-American concept of art whose universalist ideology denied the artistic and cultural specificities of others.

In the 1960s, First world political opposition against the exploitation of the Third world—acts such as solidarity with revolutions in the colonial countries from Vietnam to Cuba—created a context which brought about a radical revision of the conditions and conventions of the art of modernity. During these years, critiques of the aesthetic practices of modernity and of the object status of the work of art began to run parallel to political critiques and emancipation. A renegotiation of the concept of art began. This brought consequences such as the de-framing of the image, the departure from the image, the "dematerialization of the art object" (Lucy R. Lippard) and the deconstruction of the "white cube." The tendency towards the conceptualization and immaterialization of the art object also led to Umberto Eco's 1962 "theory of the open work of art." Eco describes the transformation of the work



of art during the shift from the machine-oriented industrial age to the post-industrial age of cybernetics and information and communications technologies. The work of art is suddenly understood as a virtuality of possible orders. Eco introduces chance and agency as aesthetic categories, and refers to the media-aesthetic structures and experiences of a live TV show to develop a poetics which gives rise to conscious acts of freedom by the interpreter. While the work of art still remains an object, it is not closed; instead, its openness increases the degree of interpretive freedom. The work of art becomes one of open interpretation and practice.

The art work of modernity is an autonomous aesthetic object, a closed system. The dissolution of the object status of the work of art brought to an end the age of modernity. After modernity, art has become an open system. Its playing field has shifted from purely aesthetic rules of object construction to the framework of social practices, i.e. action-determined events and situations, from fluxus to happening, from actionism to performance. The rules of art production and reception—as well as the definition of art itself—have

Rainer Ganahl

been deconstructed. The author in his historical form as single subject is replaced by collective or multiple “authorship.” The viewer, who up until now had been passive, becomes an active participant, especially in the interactive computer installations of the 90s.

The sphere of art thus expanded in numerous ways. In the context of the aforementioned reflexivity, the author, the work of art and the viewer, in other words, the three constants of classical art, were radically subverted and transformed. The author as single subject was replaced by groups, collectives, algorithms etc. The art work as object was supplanted by open events, actions, processes, games, action instructions and concepts. The passive observer became co-creator, player and participant. The boundaries between the diverse social actors in the art fields as well as between aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects and events became porous and invisible. The aesthetic was no longer disassociated from the cognitive or the social and political; as a result, economic and ecological agendas returned to the sphere of art.

Up to this time, series of signs whose syntactic structure followed grammatical rules, and whose semantic obeyed the rules of social conventions, produced and controlled this signifying chain and thus also the message of the work of art. When a signifying chain operates over a closed object field—for example a number of apples as the well defined selection from the world of objects—this chain produces a semantic closure which corresponds to the material closure of a work of art, i.e. framed, on a pedestal, cast in iron, sculpted from marble. Artistic practices which were subjected to the influence of chance during production and reception—for example to the freedom of the interpreter—

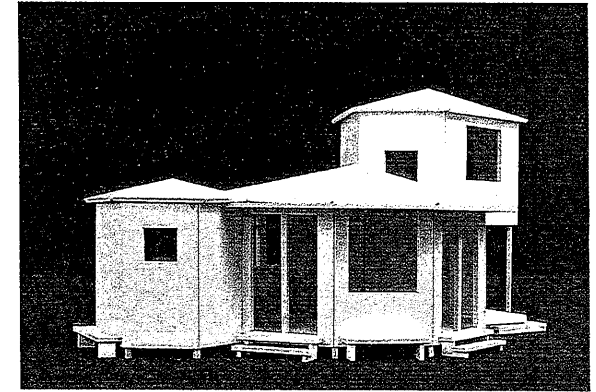
Art as Open Practice

brought about an opening of the closed signifying chain which until now had defined both the meaning of a work of art and its identity as such. The signifying chain became undone. The pieces of the chain loosened and fell apart. The prevailing strict differentiations between the sphere of high art and that of lowly every day life, between artist and consumer, between aesthetic communication and social agency became flowing and diffuse. Marginalized and unmarked spaces, sites emptied of meaning, were compared to, and set on par with, the marked sites at the center of social understanding.

The transformation of modernity can be followed in its manifestation in the text, a basic element of art. A classic book page is marked by its flush margins and the regular spacing between words, letters and lines. In computer-supported typography, the lines blend into each other and the spacing and scale of the letters are irregular. The margins are tattered. Marginal characters become central; what was considered secondary, *parerga*, occupies the center of attention and production. The emancipation of the subordinate signs ended the rule of the primary signs and created a "*parerga aesthetic*" (I. Kant).

This impoverished aesthetic of the marginal allowed art to begin to emphasize the social margins and fringes. Social criticism no longer is practiced in masterpieces of weighty significance, but rather in minor secondary works, since in its structure and materiality, the "*parerga aesthetic*" corresponds to the status of the social *parerga*, the minorities, fringe groups etc. much more closely than does magnificent, ostentatious representation. It feels strange to read calls for asceticism engraved on marble benches.

Contemporary aesthetics is aware that social critique is possible only through marginalized signs and modest

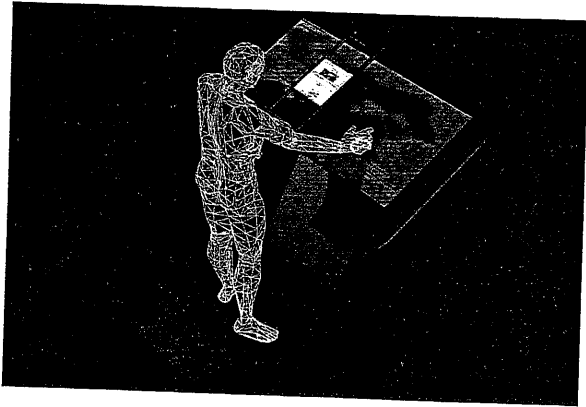


signifying systems. Worries about the Third world are no longer articulated in the terms of the First world, but rather in those of the Third world itself. This is a contract between aesthetic and social solidarity.

The aesthetic critique of modernity is a critique of the aesthetic methods of the First world, as well as of modernity as aspect of European expansionism. Anthony Giddens (The Consequences of Modernity, 1990), for example, holds the nation state and capitalist production to be directly relevant to the development of modernity. He argues that the expansion of the capitalist economic system and the expansion of the territorial system of nation states go hand in hand with the expansion of modernity. Hence a critique of modernity also means a critique of its institutional dimensions, such as military power, accumulation of capital, industrialism and information control. In its process of renewal, art dares not only to expand its sphere to include social actors and new forms of authorship and viewership, but further to enrich the sphere of art itself with new social spheres. Art is thus concerned with showing the

Art Beyond
Representation

Christine und Irene
Hohenbüchler



contours of a new social order, with complex models of democratic participation, with de-militarization and overcoming war, with a socialization of the economic order, with communication services, changes in material production, immaterial work, etc.

In 1982, Frederic Jameson argued in "Postmodernism—The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," that postmodernism was a cultural reaction against the changes of the economic order of capitalism, a response to the new means of production of the new economy. (Such as transnational corporations, the shifting of production to the Third world, the technological explosion, international ventures and global media conglomerates.) Along with I Wallerstein's work (World Inequality), Jameson's account of postmodernism in the new socio-economic world represents a significant frame of reference for the new artistic practices.

The Austrian Pavilion's contributions to the Venice Biennial operate in manifold ways with the broadened concepts of author, work and viewer sketched above. They operate in the new spheres of art beyond modernity, and therefore radically beyond the object. They

Knowbotic Research

have expanded their practices into previously unmarked territory, leaving behind the sphere of the aesthetic and the symbolic. They decolonize art by developing new practices and forms of social engagement and by critically deconstructing the institutional dimensions of modernity. (War, capital and control.) Their multifunctional practice consists both in the production of a primary work, as well as in a secondary service, either in the immaterial information or the social service sectors. Christine and Irene Hohenbüchler work in the social service sector. With their Mother-Child(ren)-House they react to the Kosovo crisis and to war as consequence of the nation state. Both have extensive experience working with another socially marginalized group, the differently-abled, whom they recognize as co-producers of joint works. Thus Christine and Irene Hohenbüchler often only appear as part of a "multiple authorship," as they themselves term their expanded notion of author. The WochenKlausur collective and the Knowbotic Research group also work with a broadened understanding of authorship. Their practices dispense with the concept of art as the production of subjectivity because this concept reproduces the position of the entrepreneur and the relations of capital. Criticism of the author becomes criticism of capitalism. Knowbotic Research's (inter)networking also operates in the secondary and tertiary sector of the economy. It concerns the financial and communications sectors—the "immaterial economy of information," as they term the changes in the work world wrought by the age of global neo-liberalism. Their discourse-project examines the significant social changes of the global information society, in particular around the concept of "immaterial labor" as it has been elaborated by the Italian Operaists around the imprisoned Italian intellectual Toni Negri. The WochenKlausur

collective also raises issue of action in the public sphere. Their multi-layered analysis of the possibilities of democratic participation enacts a critique of the institutional dimensions of modernity as well as of its symbolic politics of representation.

Beyond the Object

The connections between new art and the new economics were noticed by both art and the economy in the 1960s. However, most of the artistic contributions were just as neo-conservative as were the economic ones. In 1964, the neo-conservative economist Gary Becker published his work "Human Capital," in which he propagated the theory by which every individual is a producer. This theory of the "homo economicus" finds its correspondence in the work of Joseph Beuys, whose assertion, "creativity is capital," made every individual an artist, i.e. a producer. In both cases, the individual becomes capital. The artistic projects of Rainer Ganahl, Ecke Bonk and Peter Friedl thematize the social and cultural changes brought about by the new economics, changes defined by a decrease of the material production of labor and an increase of immaterial labor of services.

Rainer Ganahl attaches artistic value to the process of learning. The primary focus of his exhibition "Educational Complex" (Vienna, 1997) is a communicative process, rather than object production. He thematizes the social practices and roles involved in the formation of the individual, from grade school to university seminars. University seminars themselves can also be interpreted as a service within the art system, as immaterial labor of the art sector. Ecke Bonk too is interested in the deconstruction of social contracts. He suggests new models for educational institutions, such as the Wolfgang Pauli School. Bonk has a longstanding preoccupation



with typography and pictogram-related work, for which he has invented the term "typosophie." He focuses precisely on the impoverished signifying systems and on the elevation of the secondary signs over main signs, which I described above as the opening of signifying fields and chains. Peter Friedl's aesthetic work is situated between open signifying fields and open practices. The subversion of his work repeatedly targets the institutional dimensions of modernity and sometimes also those institutions which critically revise modernity. His shifts and operations in the realm of signs not only destabilize the consensus around the definition of "art," but also around that of "reality." Friedl uses impoverished situations and values to critique the economic conditions resulting from accumulation of capital. He draws the usually marginalized signifying world of the child into the center of an art exhibit, or builds a garage in the car-free Venice, the latter a presentation of a surplus-model as post-shortage-economics (A. Giddens).

WochenKlausur

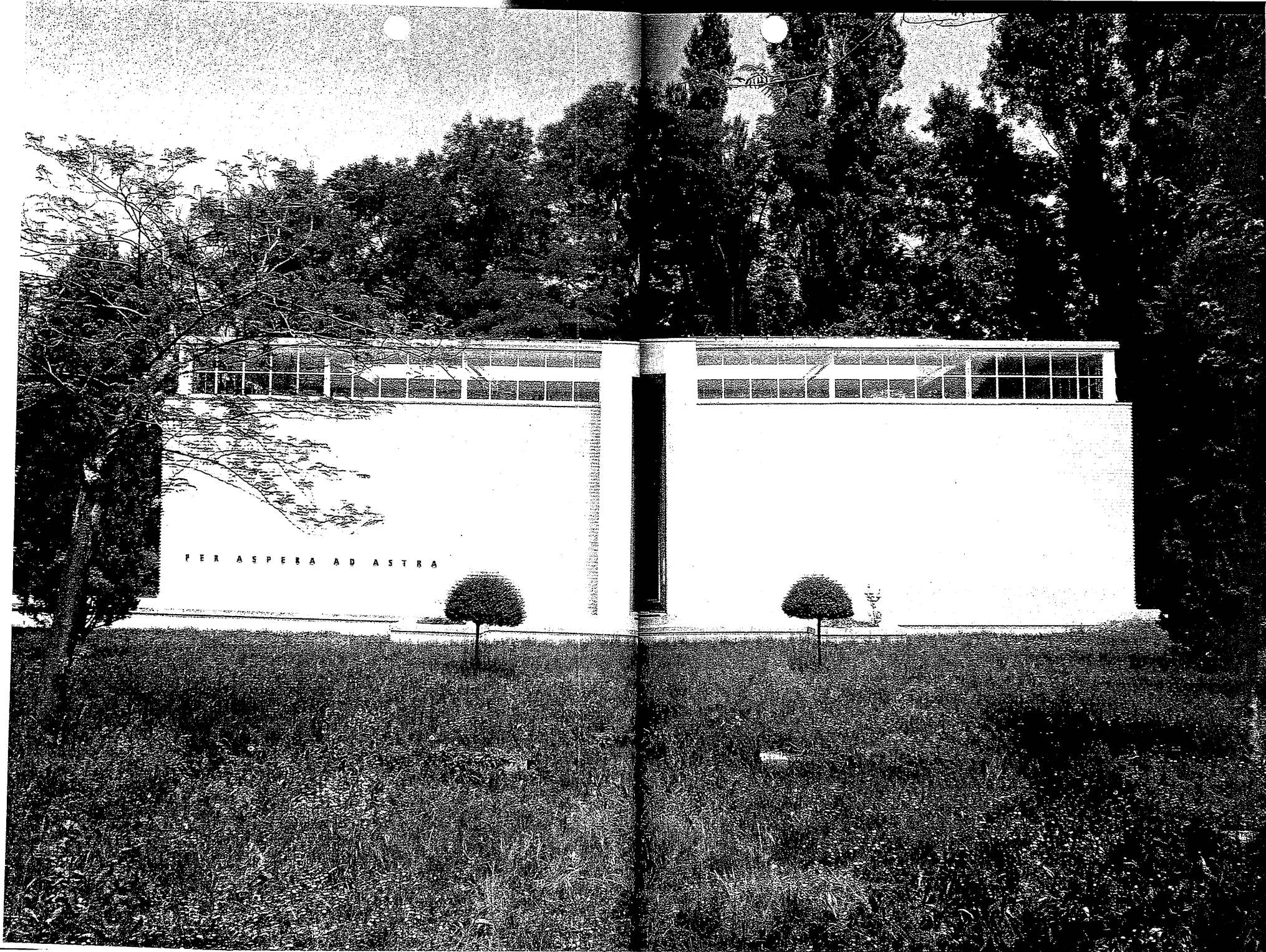
Modernity's system of representation allowed only for the reality of objects. The media-supported second modernity, as well as the third modernity, built on solidarity with the Third world, focus on the introduction of real actions into art's representational frame. WochenKlausur and the Hohenbüchler sisters leave art's symbolic frame of representation the furthest behind. Until now, art has let real objects stand in the stead of images, symbols and simulation; it has refused, however, to lend actions the status of art. It is interesting to observe that the institutions of the art community can agree that a stove can be an art object, not, however, the activity of cooking. That a real bed can be an art object, not, however, the care of a sick person in that bed. The contributions to the Austrian Pavilion radically call such distinctions into question. These contributions replace the closed aesthetic object with open signifying fields and practices, allowing plural and multiple relations to be created by the viewer himself. Hence they exceed not only the object status of art, but also radically transcend the horizon of symbolic representation. Real actions replace symbolic ones. The de-representation of the work of art follows the de-framing of the image. The critical transformation of modernity has reached a decisive turning point, the freeing of social actors and agents. The crossing of the boundary of the symbolic, the replacement of the object with practices and acts of communication, enables art to act aesthetically in the social realm, whereas until now, it could only act socially in the aesthetic realm. The observation of the world has been replaced by the observation of communication. Object construction has been replaced by social construction. In this way, the artists are able, to a certain degree, to resist the commercial exploitation of art and communication.

For this reason, the art of open practices and signifying chains—the revolt of the aesthetic of the parerga against the aesthetic of the center—may quite possibly appear unaesthetic.

As at the beginning of my activity as commissioner in 1993, Austria is again represented by a transnational collective project designed specifically for the Austrian Pavilion at the Biennial. In the context of a postcolonial discourse and a “global culture,” the inclusion in the Biennial of the previously excluded art of young people, women and Third-world artists is a necessity. An even larger necessity, however, is the opening of art itself as practice, as aesthetic, as sphere. The contributions to the Austrian Pavilion of the 1999 Biennial achieve this, standing on the threshold of a new millennium: open practice replaces the open work of art.

PER ASPERA
AD A_STR_A
(AUF RAUHEN WEGEN
ZU DEN STERNEN),
the typosophic
society, 1999

Montage:
Michael Veigl
Foto:
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PER ASPERA AD ASTRA