The Artist as Ethnographer

One of the most important interventions in the relation between artistic author-ity and cultural politics is "The Author as Producer" by Walter Benjamin, first presented as a lecture in April 1934 at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris. There, under the influence of the epic theater of Bertolt Brecht and the factographic experiments of Soviet writers like Sergei Tretiakov, Benjamin called on the artist on the left "to side with the proletariat."[1] In Paris in 1934 this call was not radical; the approach, however, was. For Benjamin urged the "advanced" artist to intervene, like the revolutionary worker, in the means of artistic production—to change the "technique" of traditional media, to trans-form the "apparatus" of bourgeois culture. A correct "tendency" was not enough; that was to assume a place "beside the proletariat." And "what kind of place is that?" Benjamin asked in lines that still scathe. "That of a benefactor, of an ideological patron—an impossible place."

Several oppositions govern this famous argument. Behind the privileging of "technique" over "theme" and "position" over "tendency" lies an implicit privileging of productivism over *proletkult,* two rival movements in the early Soviet Union. Productivism worked to develop a new proletarian culture through an extension of constructivist formal experiments into actual industrial

production; in this way it sought to *overthrow* bourgeois art and culture altogether. No less committed politically, *proletkult* worked to develop a proletarian culture in the more traditional sense of the word; it sought to *surpass* bourgeois art and culture. For Benjamin this was not enough: again implicitly, he charged movements like *proletkult* with an ideological patronage that positioned the worker as passive other.[2] However difficult, the solidarity with producers that counted for Benjamin was solidarity in material practice, not in artistic theme or political attitude alone.

A glance at this text reveals that two oppositions that still plague the reception of art—aesthetic quality versus political relevance, form versus content—were "familiar and unfruitful" as long ago as 1934. Benjamin sought to overcome these oppositions in *representation* through the third term of *production,* but neither opposition has disappeared. In the early 1980s some artists and critics returned to "Author as Producer" to work through contemporary versions of these antitheses (e.g., theory versus activism).[3] This reading of Benjamin thus differed from his reception in the late 1970s; in a retracing of his own trajectory, allegorical disruptions of image and text were pushed toward cultural-political interventions. As Benjamin had responded to the aestheticization of politics under fascism, so these artists and critics responded to the capitalization of culture and privatization of society under Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl, and company—even as these transformations made such intervention more difficult. Indeed, when this intervention was not restricted to the art apparatus alone, its strategies were more situationist than productivist—that is, more concerned with reinscriptions of given representations.[4]

This is not to say that symbolic actions were not effective; many were, especially in the middle to late 1980s, around the AIDS crisis, abortion rights, and apartheid (I think of projects by ACT-UP artist groups, posters by Barbara Kruger, projections by Krzysztof Wodiczko). But they are not my subject here. Rather, I want to suggest that a new paradigm structurally similar to the old "Author as Producer" model has emerged in advanced art on the left: *the artist as ethnographer.*

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF ALTERITY

In this new paradigm the object of contestation remains in large part the bour-
geois-capitalist institution of art (the museum, the academy, the market, and the
media), its exclusionary definitions of art and artist, identity and community.
But the subject of association has changed: it is the cultural and/or ethnic other
in whose name the committed artist most often struggles. However subtle it
may seem, this shift from a subject defined in terms of *economic relation* to one
defined in terms of *cultural identity* is significant, and I will comment further on
it below. Here, however, the parallels between these two paradigms must be
traced, for some assumptions of the old producer model persist, sometimes
problematically, in the new ethnographer paradigm. First is the assumption that
the site of political transformation is the site of artistic transformation as well,
and that political vanguards *locate* artistic vanguards and, under certain circum-
stances, substitute for them. (This myth is basic to leftist accounts of modern
art: it idealizes Jacques Louis David in the French Revolution, Gustave Courbet
in the Paris Commune, Vladimir Tatlin in the Russian Revolution, and so on.)[5]
Second is the assumption that this site is always *elsewhere*, in the field of the
other—in the producer model, with the social other, the exploited proletariat;
in the ethnographer paradigm, with the cultural other, the oppressed postcolo-
nial, subaltern, or subcultural—and that this elsewhere, this outside, is the Ar-
chimedean point from which the dominant culture will be transformed or at
least *subverted*. Third is the assumption that if the invoked artist is *not* perceived
as socially and/or culturally other, he or she has but limited access to this trans-
formative alterity, and that if he or she *is* perceived as other, he or she has
automatic access to it. Taken together, these three assumptions may lead to a
less desired point of connection with the Benjaminian account of the author as
producer: the danger, for the artist as ethnographer, of "ideological patronage."[6]

This danger may stem from the assumed split in identity between the
author and the worker or the artist and the other, but it may also arise in the
very identification (or, to use the old language, commitment) undertaken to

overcome this split. For example, the *proletkult* author might be a mere fellow traveler of the worker not because of any essential difference in identity but because identification with the worker alienates the worker, confirms rather than closes the gap between the two through a reductive, idealistic, or otherwise misbegotten representation. (This othering in identification, in representation, concerns Benjamin about *proletkult*.) A related othering may occur with the artist as ethnographer vis-à-vis the cultural other. Certainly the danger of ideological patronage is no less for the artist identified as other than for the author identified as proletarian. In fact this danger may deepen then, for the artist may be asked to assume the roles of native and informant as well as ethnographer. In short, identity is not the same as identification, and the apparent simplicities of the first should not be substituted for the actual complications of the second.

A strict Marxist might question the informant/ethnographer paradigm in art because it displaces the problematic of class and capitalist exploitation with that of race and colonialist oppression, or, more simply, because it displaces the social with the cultural or the anthropological. A strict poststructuralist might question this paradigm for the opposite reason: because it does not displace the producer problematic enough, because it tends to preserve its structure of the political—to retain the notion of a *subject* of history, to define this position in terms of *truth,* and to locate this truth in terms of *alterity* (again, this is the politics of the other, first projected, then appropriated, that interests me here).

From this poststructuralist perspective the ethnographer paradigm, like the producer model, fails to reflect on its *realist assumption:* that the other, here postcolonial, there proletarian, is somehow in reality, in truth, not in ideology, because he or she is socially oppressed, politically transformative, and/or materially productive. (For example, in 1957 Roland Barthes, who later became the foremost critic of the realist assumption, wrote: "There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, metalanguage is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible. This is why revolutionary

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language proper cannot be mythical."[7]) Often this realist assumption is compounded by a *primitivist fantasy:* that the other, usually assumed to be of color, has special access to primary psychic and social processes from which the white subject is somehow blocked—a fantasy that is as fundamental to primitivist modernisms as the realist assumption is to productivist modernisms.[8] In some contexts both myths are effective, even necessary: the realist assumption to claim the truth of one political position or the reality of one social oppression, and the primitivist fantasy to challenge repressive conventions of sexuality and aesthetics. Yet the automatic coding of apparent difference as manifest identity and of otherness as outsideness must be questioned. For not only might this coding essentialize identity, but it might also restrict the identification so important to cultural affiliation and political alliance (identification is not always ideological patronage).

There are two important precedents of the ethnographer paradigm in contemporary art where the primitivist fantasy is most active: the dissident surrealism associated with Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the *négritude* movement associated with Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In different ways both movements connected the transgressive potential of the unconscious with the radical alterity of the cultural other. Thus Bataille related self-destructive drives in the unconscious to sacrificial expenditures in other cultures, while Senghor opposed an emotionality fundamental to African cultures to a rationality fundamental to European traditions.[9] However disruptive in context, these primitivist associations came to limit both movements. Dissident surrealism may have explored cultural otherness, but only in part to indulge in a ritual of self-othering (the classic instance is *L'Afrique fantôme,* the "self-ethnography" performed by Leiris on the French ethnographic-museological mission from Dakar to Djibouti in 1931).[10] So, too, the *négritude* movement may have revalued cultural otherness, but only in part to be constrained by this second nature, by its essentialist stereotypes of blackness, emotionality, African versus European, and so on (these problems were first articulated by Frantz Fanon and later developed by Wole Soyinka and others).[11]

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In quasi-anthropological art today the primitivist association of uncon-
scious and other rarely exists in these ways. Sometimes the fantasy is taken up
as such, critically, as in *Seen* (1990) by Renée Green, where the viewer is placed
before two European fantasms of excessive African (American) female sexuality,
the mid-nineteenth-century Hottentot Venus (represented by an autopsy) and
the early-twentieth-century jazz dancer Josephine Baker (photographed in a
famous nude pose), or in *Vanilla Nightmares* (1986) by Adrian Piper, where the
racialist fantasms invoked in *New York Times* fashion advertisements become so
many black specters to delight and terrify white consumers. Yet sometimes, too,
the primitivist fantasy becomes absorbed into the realist assumption, so that now
the other is held to be *dans le vrai.* This primitivist version of the realist assump-
tion, this siting of political truth in a projected other or outside, has problematic
effects beyond the automatic coding of identity vis-à-vis alterity noted above.
First, this outside is not other in any simple sense. Second, this siting of politics
as outside and other, as transcendental opposition, may distract from a politics
of here and now, of immanent contestation.

First is the problem of the *projection* of this outside-other. In *Time and
the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983) Johannes Fabian argues that
anthropology was founded on a mythical mapping of time onto space based on
two presumptions: "1. Time is immanent to, hence coextensive with, the world
(or nature, or the universe, depending on the argument); 2. Relationships be-
tween parts of the world (in the widest sense of both natural and sociocultural
entities) can be understood as temporal relations. Dispersal in space reflects di-
rectly, which is not to say simply or in obvious ways, sequence in Time."[12] With
space and time thus mapped onto one another, "over there" became "back
then," and the most remote (as measured from some Greenwich Mean of Euro-
pean Civilization) became the most primitive. This mapping of the primitive
was manifestly racist: in the Western white imaginary its site was always dark.
It remains tenacious, however, because it is fundamental to narratives of history-
as-development and civilization-as-hierarchy. These nineteenth-century narra-
tives are residual in discourses like psychoanalysis and disciplines like art history,
which still often assume a connection between the (ontogenetic) development

of the individual and the (phylogenetic) development of the species (as in human civilization, world art, and so on). In this association the primitive is first projected by the Western white subject as a primal stage in *cultural* history and then reabsorbed as a primal stage in *individual* history. (Thus in *Totem and Taboo* [1913], with its subtitle "Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics," Freud presents the primitive as "a well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own development.")[13] Again, this association of the primitive and the prehistoric and/or the pre-Oedipal, the other and the unconscious, *is* the primitivist fantasy. However revalued by Freud, where we neurotics may also be savage, or by Bataille and Leiris or Senghor and Césaire, where such otherness is the best part of us, this fantasy is not deconstructed. *And to the extent that the primitivist fantasy is not disarticulated, to the extent that the other remains conflated with the unconscious, explorations of alterity to this day will "other" the self in old ways in which the other remains the foil of the self (however troubled this self may be in the process) more than "selve" the other in new ways in which difference is allowed, even appreciated (perhaps through a recognition of an alterity in the self). In this sense, too, the primitivist fantasy may live on in quasi-anthropological art.*

Then there is the problem of the *politics* of this outside-other. Today in our global economy the assumption of a pure outside is almost impossible. This is not to totalize our world system prematurely, but to specify both resistance and innovation as immanent relations rather than transcendental events. Long ago Fanon saw an inadvertent confirmation of European culture in the oppositional logic of the *négritude* movement, but only recently have postcolonial artists and critics pushed practice and theory from binary structures of otherness to relational models of difference, from discrete space-times to mixed border zones.[14]

This move was difficult because it runs counter to the old politics of alterity. Basic to much modernism, this appropriation of the other persists in much postmodernism. In *The Myth of the Other* (1978) Italian philosopher Franco Rella argues that theorists as diverse as Lacan, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari idealize the other as the negation of the same—with deleterious effects on cultural politics. This work often assumes dominant definitions of the

negative and/or the deviant even as it moves to revalue them.[15] So, too, it often allows rhetorical reversals of dominant definitions to stand for politics as such. More generally, this idealization of otherness tends to follow a temporal line in which one group is privileged as the new subject of history, only to be displaced by another, a chronology that may collapse not only different differences (social, ethnic, sexual, and so on) but also different positions within each difference.[16] The result is a politics that may *consume* its historical subjects before they become historically effective.

This Hegelianism of the other is not only active in modernism and postmodernism; it may be structural to the modern subject. In a celebrated passage in *The Order of Things* (1966) Michel Foucault argues that this subject, this modern man that emerges in the nineteenth century, differs from the classical subject of Cartesian and Kantian philosophies because he seeks his truth in the *un*-thought—the unconscious and the other (this is the philosophical basis of the primitivist crossing of the two). "An unveiling of the nonconscious," Foucault writes, "is the truth of all the sciences of man," and this is why such unveilings as psychoanalysis and anthropology are the most privileged of modern discourses.[17] In this light the othering of the self, past and present, is only a partial challenge to the modern subject, for this othering also buttresses the self through romantic opposition, conserves the self through dialectical appropriation, extends the self through surrealist exploration, prolongs the self through poststructuralist troubling, and so on.[18] Just as the *elaboration* of psychoanalysis and anthropology was fundamental to modern discourses (modernist art included), so the *critique* of these human sciences is crucial to postmodern discourses (postmodernist art included); as I suggested in chapter 1, the two are in a relation of deferred action. Yet this critique, which is a critique of the subject, is still centered on the subject, and *it still centers the subject.*[19] In *The Savage Mind* (1962) Claude Lévi-Strauss predicts that man will be *dissolved* in the structural-linguistic refashioning of the human sciences.[20] At the end of *The Order of Things* Foucault reiterates this famous prediction with his bold image of man "erased like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea." Intentionally or not, might the psychoanalytic-anthropological turn in contemporary practice and theory work

to *restore* this figure? Have we not slipped back into what Foucault calls "our anthropological sleep?"[21]

No doubt the othering of the self is crucial to critical practices in anthropology, art, and politics; at least in conjunctures such as the surrealist one, the use of anthropology as auto-analysis (as in Leiris) or social critique (as in Bataille) is culturally transgressive, even politically significant. But clearly too there are dangers. For then as now self-othering can flip into self-absorption, in which the project of an "ethnographic self-fashioning" becomes the practice of a narcissistic self-refurbishing.[22] To be sure, reflexivity can disturb automatic assumptions about subject-positions, but it can also promote a masquerade of this disturbance: a vogue for traumatic confessional in theory that is sometimes sensibility criticism come again, or a vogue for pseudo-ethnographic reports in art that are sometimes disguised travelogues from the world art market. Who in the academy or the art world has not witnessed these testimonies of the new empathetic intellectual or these *flâneries* of the new nomadic artist?[23]

ART AND THEORY IN THE AGE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES

What has happened here? What misrecognitions have passed between anthropology and art and other discourses? One can point to a virtual theater of projections and reflections over the last two decades at least. First some critics of anthropology developed a kind of artist envy (the enthusiasm of James Clifford for the intercultural collages of "ethnographic surrealism" is an influential instance).[24] In this envy the artist became a paragon of formal reflexivity, a self-aware reader of *culture understood as text*. But is the artist the exemplar here, or is this figure not a projection of an ideal ego of the anthropologist: the anthropologist as collagist, semiologist, avant-gardist?[25] In other words, might this artist envy be a self-idealization in which the anthropologist is remade as an artistic interpreter of the cultural text? Rarely does this projection stop there in the new anthropology or, for that matter, in cultural studies or in new historicism. Often it extends to the object of these studies, the cultural other, who is also reconfigured to reflect an ideal image of the anthropologist, critic, or historian.

This projection is hardly new to anthropology: some classics of the discipline presented entire cultures as collective artists or read them as aesthetic patterns of symbolic practices (*Patterns of Culture* by Ruth Benedict [1934] is only one example). But at least the old anthropology projected openly; the new anthropology persists in these projections, only it deems them critical, even deconstructive.

Of course the new anthropology understands culture differently, as text, which is to say that its projection onto other cultures is as textualist as it is aestheticist. This textual model is supposed to challenge "ethnographic authority" through "discursive paradigms of dialogue and polyphony."[26] However, long ago in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972) Pierre Bourdieu questioned the structuralist version of this textual model because it reduced "social relations to communicative relations and, more precisely, to decoding operations" and so rendered the ethnographic reader *more* authoritative, not less.[27] Indeed, this "ideology of the text," this recoding of practice as discourse, persists in the new anthropology as well as in quasi-anthropological art, as it does in cultural studies and new historicism, despite the contextualist ambitions that also drive these methods.[28]

Recently the old artist envy among anthropologists has turned the other way: a new ethnographer envy consumes many artists and critics. If anthropologists wanted to exploit the textual model in cultural interpretation, these artists and critics aspire to fieldwork in which theory and practice seem to be reconciled. Often they draw indirectly on basic principles of the participant–observer tradition, among which Clifford notes a critical focus on a particular institution and a narrative tense that favors "the ethnographic present."[29] Yet these borrowings are only signs of the ethnographic turn in contemporary art and criticism. What *drives* it?

There are many engagements of the other in twentieth-century art, most of which are primitivist, bound up in the politics of alterity: in surrealism, where the other is figured expressly in terms of the unconscious; in the *art brut* of Jean Dubuffet, where the other represents a redemptive anti-civilizational resource; in abstract expressionism, where the other stands for the primal exem-

plar of all artists; and variously in art in the 1960s and 1970s (the allusion to prehistoric art in some earthworks, the art world as anthropological site in some conceptual and institution-critical art, the invention of archaeological sites and anthropological civilizations by Anne and Patrick Poirier, Charles Simonds, many others).[30] So what distinguishes the present turn, apart from its relative self-consciousness about ethnographic method? First, as we have seen, anthropology is prized as the science of *alterity;* in this regard it is, along with psychoanalysis, the lingua franca of artistic practice and critical discourse alike. Second, it is the discipline that takes *culture* as its object, and this expanded field of reference is the domain of postmodernist practice and theory (thus also the attraction to cultural studies and, to a lesser extent, new historicism). Third, ethnography is considered *contextual,* the often automatic demand for which contemporary artists and critics share with other practitioners today, many of whom aspire to fieldwork in the everyday. Fourth, anthropology is thought to arbitrate the *interdisciplinary,* another often rote value in contemporary art and criticism. Fifth, the recent *self-critique* of anthropology renders it attractive, for it promises a reflexivity of the ethnographer at the center even as it preserves a romanticism of the other at the margins. For all these reasons rogue investigations of anthropology, like queer critiques of psychoanalysis, possess vanguard status: it is along these lines that the critical edge is felt to cut most incisively.

    Yet the ethnographic turn is clinched by another factor, which involves the double inheritance of anthropology. In *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976) Marshall Sahlins argues that two epistemologies have long divided the discipline: one stresses symbolic logic, with the social understood mostly in terms of exchange systems; the other privileges practical reason, with the social understood mostly in terms of material culture.[31] In this light anthropology *already* participates in the two contradictory models that dominate contemporary art and criticism: on the one hand, in the old ideology of the text, the linguistic turn in the 1960s that reconfigured the social as symbolic order and/or cultural system and advanced "the dissolution of man," "the death of the author," and so on; and, on the other hand, in the recent longing for the referent, the turn to context and identity that opposes the old text paradigms and subject

critiques. *With a turn to this split discourse of anthropology, artists and critics can resolve these contradictory models magically: they can take up the guises of cultural semiologist and contextual fieldworker, they can continue and condemn critical theory, they can relativize and recenter the subject, all at the same time.* In our current state of artistic-theoretical ambivalences and cultural-political impasses, anthropology is the compromise discourse of choice.[32]

Again, this ethnographer envy is shared by many critics, especially in cultural studies and new historicism, who assume the role of ethnographer usually in disguised form: the cultural-studies ethnographer dressed down as a fellow fan (for reasons of political solidarity, but with great social anxiety); the new-historicist ethnographer dressed up as a master archivist (for reasons of scholarly respectability, but with great professional arrogance). First some anthropologists adapted textual methods from literary criticism in order to reformulate culture as text; then some literary critics adapted ethnographic methods in order to reformulate texts as cultures writ small. And these exchanges have accounted for much interdisciplinary work in the recent past.[33] But there are two problems with this theater of projections and reflections, the first methodological, the second ethical. If both textual and ethnographic turns depended on a single discourse, how truly *inter*disciplinary can the results be? If cultural studies and new historicism often smuggle in an ethnographic model (when not a sociological one), might it be "the *common theoretical ideology* that silently inhabits the 'consciousness' of all these specialists . . . oscillating between a vague spiritualism and a technocratic positivism"?[34] The second problem, broached above, is more serious. When the other is admired as playful in representation, subversive of gender, and so on, might it be a projection of the anthropologist, artist, critic, or historian? In this case an ideal practice might be projected onto the field of the other, which is then asked to reflect it as if it were not only authentically indigenous but innovatively political.

In part this is a projection of my own, and the application of new and old ethnographic methods has illuminated much. But it has also obliterated much in the field of the other, and in its name. This is the opposite of a critique of ethnographic authority, indeed the opposite of ethnographic method, at least

as I understand them. And this "impossible place," as Benjamin called it long ago, is a common occupation of many anthropologists, artists, critics, and historians.

THE SITING OF CONTEMPORARY ART

The ethnographic turn in contemporary art is also driven by developments within the minimalist genealogy of art over the last thirty-five years. These developments constitute a sequence of investigations: first of the material constituents of the art medium, then of its spatial conditions of perception, and then of the corporeal bases of this perception—shifts marked in minimalist art in the early 1960s through conceptual, performance, body, and site-specific art in the early 1970s. Soon the institution of art could no longer be described only in spatial terms (studio, gallery, museum, and so on); it was also a discursive network of different practices and institutions, other subjectivities and communities. Nor could the observer of art be delimited only in phenomenological terms; he or she was also a social subject defined in language and marked by difference (economic, ethnic, sexual, and so on). Of course the breakdown of restrictive definitions of art and artist, identity and community, was also pressured by social movements (civil rights, various feminisms, queer politics, multiculturalism) as well as theoretical developments (the convergence of feminism, psychoanalysis, and film theory; the recovery of Antonio Gramsci and the development of cultural studies in Britain; the applications of Louis Althusser, Lacan, and Foucault, especially in the British journal *Screen;* the development of postcolonial discourse with Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and others; and so on). Thus did art pass into the expanded field of culture that anthropology is thought to survey.

These developments also constitute a series of shifts in the *siting* of art: from the surface of the medium to the space of the museum, from institutional frames to discursive networks, to the point where many artists and critics treat conditions like desire or disease, AIDS or homelessness, as sites for art.[35] Along with this figure of siting has come the analogy of *mapping*. In an important

moment Robert Smithson and others pushed this cartographic operation to a geological extreme that transformed the siting of art dramatically. Yet this siting had limits too: it could be recouped by gallery and museum, it played to the myth of the redemptive artist (a very traditional site), and so on. Otherwise mapping in recent art has tended toward the sociological and the anthropological, to the point where an ethnographic mapping of an institution or a community is a primary form of site-specific art today.

Sociological mapping is implicit in some conceptual art, sometimes in a parodic way, from the laconic recording of *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* by Ed Ruscha (1963) to the quixotic project of Douglas Huebler to photograph every human being (*Variable Piece: 70*). An important example here is *Homes for America* by Dan Graham, a report (published in a 1966–67 *Arts* magazine) of modular repetitions in a tract-housing development that reframes minimalist structures as found objects in a technocratic suburb. Sociological mapping is more explicit in much institutional critique, especially in the work of Hans Haacke, from the polls and profiles of gallery and museumgoers and the exposés of real-estate moguls in New York (1969–73) through the pedigrees of masterpiece collectors (1974–75) to the investigations of arrangements among museums, corporations, and governments. However, while this work questions social authority incisively, it does not reflect on sociological authority.

This is less true of work that examines the authority arrogated in documentary modes of representation. In a videotape like *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1976) and in a photo-text like *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974–75), Martha Rosler belies the apparent objectivity of medical statistics regarding the female body and of sociological descriptions concerning the destitute alcoholic. Recently she has also pushed this critical use of documentary modes toward the geopolitical concerns that have long driven the work of Allan Sekula. In a cycle of three photo-text sequences in particular, Sekula traces the connections between German borders and Cold War politics (*Sketch for a Geography Lesson,* 1983), a mining industry and a financial institution (*Canadian Notes,* 1986), and maritime space and global economics (*Fish Story,*

1995). With these "imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capital-ist world," he sketches a "cognitive map" of our global order. Yet, with his perspectival shifts in narrative and image, Sekula is as reflexive as any new an-thropologist about the hubris of this ethnographic project.[36]

An awareness of sociological presumptions and anthropological compli-cations also guides the feminist mappings of artists like Mary Kelly and Silvia Kolbowski. Thus in *Interim* (1984–89) Kelly registers personal and political po-sitions within the feminist movement through a polyphonic mix of images and voices. In effect, she represents the movement as a kinship system in which she participates as an indigenous ethnographer of art, theory, teaching, activism, friendship, family, mentorship, aging. In various reframings of institutional definitions of art Kolbowski also takes up ethnographic mapping reflexively. In projects like *Enlarged from the Catalogue* (1987–88), she proposes a feminist ethnography of the cultural authority at work in art exhibitions, catalogues, reviews, and the like.[37]

Such reflexivity is essential, for, as Bourdieu warned, ethnographic map-ping is predisposed to a Cartesian opposition that leads the observer to abstract the culture of study. Such mapping may thus confirm rather than contest the authority of mapper over site in a way that reduces the desired exchange of dialogical fieldwork.[38] In his mappings of other cultures Lothar Baumgarten is sometimes charged with such arrogance. In several works over the last two decades he has inscribed the names of indigenous societies of North and South America, often imposed by explorers and ethnographers alike, in such settings as the neoclassical dome of the Museum Fredericianum in Kassel (Germany) in 1982 and the modernist spiral of the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1993. Yet rather than ethnographic trophies, these names return, almost as dis-torted signs of the repressed, to challenge the mappings of the West: in the neoclassical dome as if to declare that the other face of Old World Enlighten-ment is New World Conquest, and in the Frank Lloyd Wright spiral as if to demand a new globe without narratives of modern and primitive or hierarchies of North and South, a different map in which the framer is also framed, plunged

in a parallax in a way that complicates the old anthropological oppositions of an us-here-and-now versus a them-there-and-then.[39]

Yet the Baumgarten example points to another complication: these ethnographic mappings are often commissioned. Just as appropriation art in the 1980s became an aesthetic genre, even a media spectacle, so new site-specific work often seems a museum event in which the institution *imports* critique, whether as a show of tolerance or for the purpose of inoculation (against a critique undertaken by the institution, within the institution). Of course this position within the museum may be necessary to such ethnographic mappings, especially if they purport to be deconstructive: just as appropriation art, in order to engage media spectacle, had to participate in it, so new site-specific work, in order to remap the museum or to reconfigure its audience, must operate inside it. This argument holds for the most incisive of these projects, such as *Mining the Museum* by Fred Wilson and *Aren't They Lovely?* by Andrea Fraser (both 1992).

In *Mining the Museum,* sponsored by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Baltimore, Wilson acted as an archaeologist of the Maryland Historical Society. First he explored its collection (an initial "mining"). Then he reclaimed representations evocative of histories, mostly African-American, not often displayed as historical (a second "mining"). Finally he reframed still other representations that have long arrogated the right to history (for example, in an exhibit labeled "Metalwork 1793–1880," he placed a pair of slave manacles—a third "mining" that exploded the given representation). In so doing Wilson also served as an ethnographer of African-American communities lost, repressed, or otherwise displaced in such institutions. Andrea Fraser performed a different archaeology of museum archives and ethnography of museum cultures. In *Aren't They Lovely?* she reopened a private bequest to the art museum at the University of California at Berkeley in order to investigate how the heterogeneous domestic objects of a specific class member (from eyeglasses to Renoirs) are sublimated into the homogenous public culture of a general art museum. Here Fraser addressed institutional *sublimation,* whereas Wilson focused on institutional *repression.* Nonetheless, both artists play with museology first to expose and then to

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reframe the institutional codings of art and artifacts—how objects are translated into historical evidence and/or cultural exempla, invested with value, and cathected by viewers.

However, for all the insight of such projects, the deconstructive-ethnographic approach can become a gambit, an insider game that renders the institution not more open and public but more hermetic and narcissistic, a place for initiates only where a contemptuous criticality is rehearsed. So, too, as we saw in chapter 4, the ambiguity of deconstructive positioning, at once inside and outside the institution, can lapse into the duplicity of cynical reason in which artist and institution have it both ways—retain the social status of art and entertain the moral purity of critique, the one a complement or compensation for the other.

These are dangers of site-specific work inside the institution; others arise when this work is sponsored outside the institution, often in collaboration with local groups. Consider the example of "Project Unité," a commission of forty or so installations for the Unité d'Habitation in Firminy (France) during the summer of 1993. Here the quasi-anthropological paradigm operated on two levels: first, indirectly, in that this dilapidated housing project designed by Le Corbusier was treated as an ethnographic site (has such modern architecture become exotic in this way?); and then, directly, in that its largely immigrant community was offered to the artists for ethnographic engagement. One project suggests the pitfalls of such an arrangement. Here the neo-conceptual team Clegg & Guttmann asked the Unité residents to contribute casettes for a discotheque, which were then edited, compiled, and displayed according to apartment and floor in a model of the building as a whole. Lured by collaboration, the inhabitants loaned these cultural proxies, only to have them turned into anthropological exhibits. And the artists did not question the ethnographic authority, indeed the sociological condescension, involved in this facilitated self-representation.

This is typical of the quasi-anthropological scenario. Few principles of the ethnographic participant-observer are observed, let alone critiqued, and only limited engagement of the community is effected. Almost naturally the

project strays from collaboration to self-fashioning, from a decentering of the artist as cultural authority to a remaking of the other in neo-primitivist guise. Of course this is not always the case: many artists have used these opportunities to collaborate with communities innovatively, to recover suppressed histories that are sited in particular ways, that are accessed by some more effectively than others. And symbolically this new site-specific work can reoccupy lost cultural spaces and propose historical counter-memories. (I think of the signs posted by Edgar Heap of Birds that reclaim Native American land in Oklahoma and elsewhere, and of the projects developed by collectives like Repo History that point to suppressed histories beneath official commemorations in New York and elsewhere.) Nevertheless, *the quasi-anthropological role set up for the artist can promote a presuming as much as a questioning of ethnographic authority, an evasion as often as an extension of institutional critique.*

At Firminy the ethnographic model was used to animate an old site, but it can also be used to develop a new one. The local and the everyday are thought to resist economic development, yet they can also attract it, for such development needs the local and the everyday even as it erodes these qualities, renders them siteless. In this case site-specific work can be exploited to make these nonspaces seem specific again, to redress them as grounded places, not abstract spaces, in historical and/or cultural terms.[40] Killed as culture, the local and the everyday can be revived as simulacrum, a "theme" for a park or a "history" in a mall, and site-specific work can be drawn into this zombification of the local and the everyday, this Disney version of the site-specific. Tabooed in postmodernist art, values like authenticity, originality, and singularity can return as properties of sites that artists are asked to define or to embellish. There is nothing wrong with this return per se, but sponsors may regard these properties precisely as sited values to develop.[41]

Art institutions may also use site-specific work for economic development, social outreach, and art tourism, and at a time of privatization this is assumed necessary, even natural. In "Culture in Action," a 1993 public art program of Sculpture Chicago, eight projects were sited throughout the city. Led by artists like Daniel Martinez, Mark Dion, and Kate Ericson and Mel Zeigler,

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these collaborations did serve "as an urban laboratory to involve diverse audiences in the creation of innovative public art projects."[42] But they could not but also serve as public-relations probes for the corporations and agencies that supported them. Another instance of this ambiguous public service is the yearly designation of a "Cultural Capital of Europe." In Antwerp, the capital for 1993, several site-specific works were again commissioned. Here the artists explored lost histories more than engaged present communities, in keeping with the motto of the show: "On taking a normal situation and retranslating it into overlapping and multiple readings of conditions past and present." Borrowed from Gordon Matta-Clark, a pioneer of site-specific work, this motto mixes the metaphors of site-mapping and situationist *détournement* (defined long ago by Guy Debord as "the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble").[43] Yet here again impressive site-specific projects were also turned into tourist sites, and situationist disruption was reconciled with cultural-political promotion.

In these cases the institution may shadow the work that it otherwise highlights: it becomes the spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the star. This is not a conspiracy, nor is it cooption pure and simple; nevertheless, it can detour the artist more than reconfigure the site.[44] Just as the *proletkult* author according to Benjamin sought to stand in the reality of the proletariat, only in part to sit in the place of the patron, so the ethnographic artist may collaborate with a sited community, only to have this work redirected to other ends. Often artist and community are linked through an identitarian reduction of both, the apparent authenticity of the one invoked to guarantee that of the other, in a way that threatens to collapse new site-specific work into identity politics, *tout court*.[45] As the artist stands *in* the identity of a sited community, he or she may be asked to stand *for* this identity, to represent it institutionally. In this case the artist is primitivized, indeed anthropologized, in turn: here is your community, the institution says in effect, embodied in your artist, now on display.

For the most part the relevant artists are aware of these complications, and sometimes they foreground them. In many performances James Luna has acted out the stereotypes of the Native American in white culture (the orna-

mental warrior, the ritualistic shaman, the drunken Indian, the museum object). In so doing he invites these popular primitivisms to parody them, to force them back on his audience explosively. Jimmie Durham also pressures these primitivisms to the point of critical explosion, of utter bombast, especially in a work like *Self-Portrait* (1988), a figure that plays on the wooden chief of smoke-shop lore with an absurdist text of popular fantasies regarding the Indian male body. In his hybrid works Durham mixes ritualistic and found objects in a way that is preemptively auto-primitivist and wryly anti-categorical. These pseudo-primitive fetishes and pseudo-ethnographic artifacts resist further primitivizing and anthropologizing through a parodic "trickstering" of these very processes. All such strategies—a parody of primitivisms, a reversal of ethnographic roles, a preemptive playing-dead, a plurality of practices—disturb a dominant culture that depends on strict stereotypes, stable lines of authority, and humanist reanimations and museological resurrections of many sorts.[46]

DISCIPLINARY MEMORY AND CRITICAL DISTANCE

I want to elaborate two points in conclusion, the first to do with the siting of contemporary art, the second with the function of reflexivity within it. I suggested above that many artists treat conditions like desire or disease as sites for work. In this way they work *horizontally,* in a synchronic movement from social issue to issue, from political debate to debate, more than *vertically,* in a diachronic engagement with the disciplinary forms of a given genre or medium. Apart from the general shift (noted in chapter 2) from formalist "quality" to neo-avant-garde "interest," there are several markers of this move from medium-specific to discourse-specific practice. In "Other Criteria" (1968) Leo Steinberg saw a turn, in early Rauschenberg combines, from a vertical model of picture-as-window to the horizontal model of picture-as-text, from a "natural" paradigm of image as framed landscape to a "cultural" paradigm of image as informational network, which he regarded as inaugural of postmodernist art making.[47] Yet this shift from vertical to horizontal remained operational at best; its social dimension was not developed until pop. "Its acceptance

[handwritten marginalia: Jakobson { horizontal = metonymy / vertical = metaphor]

of the mass media entails a shift in our notion of what culture is," Lawrence Alloway predicted long ago in "The Long Front of Culture" (1958). "Rather than frozen in layers in a pyramid," pop placed art "within a continuum" of culture.[48] Thus, if Rauschenberg and company sought other criteria than the formalist terms of medium-specific modernism, so pop repositioned the engagement with high art along the long front of culture. This horizontal expansion of artistic expression and cultural value is furthered, critically and not, in quasi-anthropological art and cultural studies alike.

A few effects of this expansion might be stressed. First, the shift to a horizontal way of working is consistent with the ethnographic turn in art and criticism: one selects a site, enters its culture and learns its language, conceives and presents a project, only to move to the next site where the cycle is repeated. Second, this shift follows a spatial logic: one not only maps a site but also works in terms of topics, frames, and so on (which may or may not point to a general privileging of space over time in postmodern discourse).[49] Now in the postmodernist rupture, associated in chapter 1 with a return to the historical avant-garde, the horizontal, spatial axis still intersected the vertical, temporal axis. In order to extend aesthetic space, artists delved into historical time, and returned past models to the present in a way that opened new sites for work. The two axes were in tension, but it was a productive tension; ideally coordinated, the two moved forward together, with past and present in parallax. Today, as artists follow horizontal lines of working, the vertical lines sometimes appear to be lost.

This horizontal way of working demands that artists and critics be familiar not only with the structure of each culture well enough to map it, but also with its history well enough to narrate it. Thus if one wishes to work on AIDS, one must understand not only the discursive *breadth* but also the historical *depth* of AIDS representations. To coordinate both axes of several such discourses is an enormous burden. And here the traditionalist caution about the horizontal way of working—that new discursive connections may blur old disciplinary memories—must be considered, if only to be countered. Implicit in the charge is that this move has rendered contemporary art dangerously political. Indeed, this image of art is dominant in general culture, with all the calls to purify art of politics

altogether. These calls are obviously self-contradictory, yet they too must be considered in order to be countered.[50]

My second point concerns the reflexivity of contemporary art. I have stressed that reflexivity is needed to protect against an over-identification with the other (through commitment, self-othering, and so on) that may compromise this otherness. Paradoxically, as Benjamin implied long ago, this over-identification may alienate the other further if it does not allow for the othering already at work in representation. In the face of these dangers—of too little or too much distance—I have advocated parallactic work that attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other. This is one way to negotiate the contradictory status of otherness as given and constructed, real and fantasmatic.[51] This framing can be as simple as a caption to a photograph, as in The Bowery project by Rosler, or a reversal of a name, as in the signs of Heap of Birds or Baumgarten. Yet such reframing is not sufficient alone. Again, reflexivity can lead to a hermeticism, even a narcissism, in which the other is obscured, the self pronounced; it can also lead to a refusal of engagement altogether. *And what does critical distance guarantee?* Has this notion become somewhat mythical, *a*critical, a form of magical protection, a purity ritual of its own? Is such distance still desirable, let alone possible?

Perhaps not, but a reductive over-identification with the other is not desirable either. Far worse, however, is a murderous disidentification from the other. Today the cultural politics of left and right seem stuck at this impasse.[52] To a great extent the left over-identifies with the other as victim, which locks it into a hierarchy of suffering whereby the wretched can do little wrong. To a much greater extent the right disidentifies from the other, which it blames as victim, and exploits this disidentification to build political solidarity through fantasmatic fear and loathing. Faced with this impasse, critical distance might not be such a bad idea after all. It is to this question that I turn in the final chapter.