

## The Long Nineties

Revisiting art's social turn and the 1990s – the decade that has yet to end

Mocked and ridiculed, the 1980s met a pitiful end at the hands of a generation of artists who considered a market-friendly, object-based art their ideological nemesis, and punished it summarily for its false richness.

This is an exaggeration, of course, but ask around in my (Northern European) corner of the world, and I would guess that many of those who were working back then will confirm this picture of a generational showdown. By contrast, faded and forgotten as they may be, 'the long nineties' remain unsubverted.<sup>1</sup> The symbolic revival of Félix González-Torres at the 2011 Istanbul Biennial, for instance, echoed his status as a guiding star of curating and art theory of that decade.

However, during the last five years, as the historicization of the '90s gains momentum, the jury has gradually reconvened. The case being weighed is that of art's relationship to the social. In 2007, Ina Blom published *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality and Media Culture*, examining the practices of many of the prominent artists of the '90s and after; a 2010 symposium at Tate Britain was entitled 'Art and the Social: Exhibitions of Contemporary Art in the 1990s'; and Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* will be published by Verso in 2012. The art-historical claim of the latter is that the 'social turn' should be 'positioned more accurately as a return to the social, part of an ongoing history of attempts to rethink art collectively'.<sup>2</sup> I will proceed more sceptically – or *counter*-socially – by revisiting the '90s through the social as a problematic not only for art, but also in relation to the 'governmentality' of our time – Michel Foucault's term for the economics and relations of power that shape a society as a field of possible action.

Unlike the slippery '90s, which haven't yet found their closure, there is some certainty to be found in the '80s. The art of that decade took distinct forms – such as appropriation or neo-expressionism – whereas '90s positions were summed up in a single term: 'contemporary art'. Not a new term, exactly, but indicative of a new state of connectivity and synchronicity, in which contemporary art experienced a major upgrade (or was it a paradigm shift?). Art's markets and modes of circulation changed, as did professional and

## About this article

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**Art Club 2000** *Untitled (Conran's I)*, 1992–3, c-type print

[Back to the main site](#)

political attitudes towards it. Art became animated by biennials, magazines and art fairs; by artists who strayed from the studio and integrated their mobility into their work; and by curators who shed the historical baggage of the museum's archive. The general activity that surrounded art – its media, infrastructure and social activity – became as prominent and energetic as art itself.

Around the same time, art's social turn occurred. This gave visual art a new lease of life at a point when it had otherwise been declared dead (along with the avant-garde, the novel, the human being, the author, etc.). The idea of the social contradicted the demonization of reality and presence of much of the work of the '80s. No longer something remote, academic and monumental, art became a situation or a process. A work was now a club, a bar, a meal, a cinema, a hang-out, a dance floor, a game of football or a piece of furniture: think of Rirkrit Tiravanija's soup kitchens, Angela Bulloch's bean-bags or Apolonija Šušteršič's public structures. The sole author and the contemplative beholder were atomized in works that called for togetherness, and were often created by collectives or self-organized entities. The art institution started to reflect on itself as a critical space, and exhibition formats opened up in turn. Art took place anywhere – in front of a video camera, on an answering machine, in the urban space. Everyday life became meaningful again, even a refuge from late capitalism.

This is how artists escaped the melancholy slipstream of Modernist painting and sculpture, and no doubt a reason why the young art scene at the time greeted the reintroduction of art's social dimension enthusiastically. Importantly, however, the affirmation of the social indicates an ambiguity with which social space, and history itself, had become imbued. On the one hand, the artist was no longer Postmodernism's agent, hovering above the delta of history, selecting and copying styles from all times. The artist was now down in it. On the other hand, history had ended – a claim put forward by conservative thinkers vis-à-vis the end of the Cold War, but which was also argued from a different perspective by critical minds such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, who saw no outside to the present order.

The 'no outside' predicament was an attempt at reality-checking the effects of ideological conflict cancelled by Tony Blair's and Gerhard Schröder's 'Third Way' paradigm. Left and right merged, state and economy were integrated in increasingly informal ways, and politics lost its fixed points. Foucault described neo-liberalism as sociological government: in this model, the realms of the social and cultural – rather than the economy – are mobilized for competition and commerce.<sup>3</sup> During the 1990s, a new economy began brimming with imperatives to socialize through email, mobile phones and, later, social media, and as social and economic processes were pulled closer together,

both art and power became 'sociological'. The reification of the social form became almost indistinguishable from social content. In other words, the social can also be a simulacrum: an instrumentalization of models and tastes that are already received and working in the culture at large.

Management theory expanded into art, as Richard Florida's notion of the 'creative class' (2002) and James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine's *The Experience Economy* (1999) submitted aesthetic concepts to socialization. In some cases – such as the UK's New Labour government, who came to power in 1997 – cultural policies organized art around the economic centre of society in much the same terms. It wasn't just a case of management theory colonizing aesthetic concepts, though: the art system was itself involved in rationalizing the idea of the artist as manager.

These factors contributed to art being pulled up from the underground, down from the ivory tower and in from the margins, making it part of governed reality in new ways. From the point of view of a 'creative' economy, aesthetic concept and artistic behaviour became models for productivity. This doesn't turn the art that artists created into a passive symptom; but it was a development that placed high stakes on the cultural analysis inherent in the art work, if the work were to avoid melding with the manifest social needs and ends of the state, society or any other milieu.



**Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio** *We got it!*, 1993, billboard design for 40 locations in Chicago as part of 'Culture in Action', 1992–3

In September 2011, the exhibition 'Specters of the Nineties' opened at Marres Centre for Contemporary Culture in Maastricht. Curated by Lisette Smits, in collaboration with Matthieu Laurette, the project proposed a reading of critical artistic practices of the '90s, but via a materialist analysis that took the technological revolution as the cause of the change not only of society but of artistic practice itself. The organizers presented these as cases to contest both the forgetting of artistic practices of the decade and the way some of these have been dismissed as 'affirmative of the system' and of neo-liberalism.<sup>4</sup> Even if one shares this materialist analysis, it looks like Smits and Laurette don't agree with my position that the '90s are unsubverted. But I could counter

that significant artistic positions of the decade have rarely been associated directly with power the way that the works of Jeff Koons, for instance, were read as unambiguous symptoms of Reaganism.

However, I do agree that a historical look at the '90s is relevant in light of artistic practices that dealt (or deal) with social space through meta-strategies of semiotic playfulness or forms of structural critique, such as those of Renée Green, Jens Haaning, Pierre Huyghe and Aleksandra Mir. In 1996, Haaning relocated the entire production line of a Turkish-owned textile factory in Vlissingen in the Netherlands – including immigrant workers, goods and machinery – into De Vleeshal, a Kunsthalle in neighbouring Middelburg. Self-referentially titled *Middelburg Summer 1996*, the work showed art and the social to be ever-changing placeholders for each other that would never coincide: it was part of the social world where it was created, and at the same time its aesthetic content set it apart from what already existed.

One could also speculate that, without Postmodernism's keen sense of historical repetition, the '90s was also the long decade that forgot it was part of the 20th century. Let me quote works by some of the big names: Olafur Eliasson's *Green River* (1998–2001) was, apart from its locations, identical to Nicolás García Urriburu's *Coloration du Grand Canal* (Dyeing the Grand Canal, 1968) in Venice; Maurizio Cattelan's sub-letting of his allotted space at the 1993 Venice Biennale to an advertising agency in principle repeated Poul Gernes's 1970 collaboration with Citroën and Bang & Olufsen for the Louisiana Museum's 'Tabernakel' exhibition; and Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006) echoes the film *Fussball wie noch nie* (Football as Never Before, 1970) by Hellmuth Costard, which followed George Best through an entire football match. When comparing these works, should one look for copies or coincidences? Were these artists in their own way creating a reception of postwar art that art historians had failed to write? Or did a global culture industry make it possible to reproduce the 1960s neo-avant-garde because art was now legitimated through powerful spheres of circulation (institutional, commercial and mediatic) that didn't exist then?

One can only begin to answer these questions by acknowledging that the social signifies something fundamentally different at different historical times. The category of the social evades an understanding of historical continuity because it privileges space over time, presence over form. It is fundamentally contemporary, a concept without speed and virtuality – and this is how it may fail as a chronopolitics. At the same time, apparatuses inherent to the social sphere also synchronize by creating bubbles in time: the marketplace creates simultaneity in consumption, and because the spectacle wants art big and easy, it disregards the

archive and its tedious historical perspectives. When synchronizing functions such as these pull things closer together around the existing moment, contemporary art may end up performing an eternal return to the present as a temporal effect of sociological government.



**Nicolás García Uriburu** *Coloration du Grand Canal* (Dyeing the Grand Canal), 1968, colourant, Grand Canal, Venice

In *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), Nicolas Bourriaud fixed the monstrosity and megalomania of the historical avant-gardes by proposing the more flexible artistic 'micro-Utopia'.<sup>5</sup> This was a Utopianism that didn't resonate with Modernism's five-year plans and personal sacrifices, but was closer to the manageable time-spaces of Foucauldian micropolitics and Hakim Bey's idea of temporary autonomous zones. Some 20 years earlier, Roland Barthes questioned the fantasy of privileged political orders, whether micro or macro in his *Sade / Fourier / Loyala* (1980): 'Can a Utopia be otherwise than domestic?' he asked, suggesting a measure of unfreedom in the very concept.

The social sculpture of the '90s was never really a discussion about freedom. Emancipatory thinking figured as modestly on the agenda as it had in the post-Structuralist theory that informed so much '80s art. In the preface to his 1983 anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster proposed a 'Postmodernism of resistance' informed by the 'desire to change the object and its social context', against neo-conservative attempts at severing the cultural from the social. Ironically, however, while it re-established the political on the agenda, Foster's notion of an 'oppositional Postmodernism' can be seen to have helped pave the way for what also became a retro-Modernism (including the return of Utopia). His position prefigured a tendency to conflate the aesthetic with political conservatism, thereby turning aesthetic concepts into epiphenomena. This was the case for big categories of aesthetic collateral such as spirituality and metaphysics, but also staples of form, autonomy and pleasure (for instance, what Barthes had called *le plaisir du texte*, or 'the pleasure of the text'), were ditched in the social turn.

At the same time (and somewhat counter-intuitively) former keywords of artistic and social critique – conformism, alienation, negation – were likewise ejected from the vocabulary. It is difficult to escape the feeling that the highs and lows of aesthetic experience were truncated, and art lost some of what Theodor Adorno called its infinite difficulty.<sup>6</sup> Polemically speaking, where this was the case the social turn was neither a social critique that addressed misery, exploitation and inequality, nor was it an artistic critique of risks deriving from the dominance of utilitarian thinking.<sup>7</sup> This lack was not necessarily indicative of the art as such – after all, a video of the artist dancing can be seductive; a living unit can be a negation – but of a critical vocabulary that revolved around concreteness, a can-do attitude and art on a human scale. Aesthetic experience is compromised when aesthetic problems, and the aesthetic as a problematic, are resolved in social space.

Today, the managerial rhetoric of creativity is fading quickly with yesteryear's economic optimism. Still, the social is hardly a cold case. The 2012 Berlin Biennial will be curated by the artist Artur Zmijewski, author of the manifesto 'The Applied Social Arts' (2007). Here he encourages artists to strive for 'social impact', arguing that 'since the 1990s, art has been growing increasingly institutionalized [and] anodyne'. However, it remains an open question whether one can cure art with the 'radical forms of expression' Zmijewski recommends, seeing that the social was a constitutive theme in the decade that, in his own analysis, turned the screw of institutionalization.

As the social persists as a theme in artistic practice and art history, as well as in the 'social practice' programmes of art schools, it seems urgent to articulate the limit of art's

integration into society. Perhaps it is time to re-conceptualize the aesthetic as a mode of thinking in order to articulate difference, new outsides and the transcendental, understood as the condition of historical practices and that which lies at the edge of social relations. The present cannot only be changed from its inside. To regain its futurity it must be reconfigured from afar, too.

1 Tom Morton talked about 'the long 1990s' in his review of the 8th Lyon Biennial in issue 95 of *frieze* (November–December 2005)

2 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, book manuscript, p.3 (to be published by Verso in 2012)

3 See Michael Senellart (ed.), *Michel Foucault: The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–79, 2008*, Macmillan, chapter six

4 Email conversation between the author and Lisette Smits, 13 September 2011

5 In addition to Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* and Peter Weibel's *Kontextkunst* (*Context Art*, 1993), Nina Möntmann published *Kunst als sozialer Raum* (*Art as Social Space*, 2002), Sarah Lowndes published *Social Sculpture: The Rise of the Glasgow Art Scene* (2003), Craig Saper talked about 'sociopoetic art' (in *Networked Art*, 2001), and I wrote about 'social aesthetics' (in an eponymous essay in issue one of *Afterall*, 1999)

6 For Adorno, 'Art is indeed infinitely difficult in that it must transcend its concept in order to fulfil it.' (Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1970, p. 103)

7 Eve Chiapello distinguishes between social critique and artistic critique in 'Die Kritik der Künstler am Management', in *Angewandte Sozialforschung* (*Applied Social Research*), 2006, vol. 24, no. 1–2, pp. 19–24

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Page 1 of 1 pages for this article

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