CHAPTER 12

Post-Autonomous Art

It becomes impossible to criticize the culture industry without criticizing art at the same time.
T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

1.

I will begin with some reflections on the theme of the installation medium. To an extent, the installation is an intrusion of orthodoxy onto the territory of a modernist or postmodernist world picture—not only in the realm of visual representation, but in the arena of social life in general. I am referring to Debord's "society of the spectacle," or in a more "arcane" terminology, "the society of the installation." Curiously, the most advanced (or technologically equipped) spaces of mass complicity are based on the same principle as archaic ritual spaces, and that's precisely why I connect this to orthodoxy. Moreover, holy rites, mysteries, liturgies, corporate board meetings, and political actions require props, require reorganization of space—that is, installation metaphors. Ritual has always created itself, constructing not only objects of worship and altars, but the very consciousness of the participants ("parishioners").

Artists crave installation because the center of gravity has been transferred from the relationship between art and life to the relationship between culture and ritual, which in turn heralds the repetition—or, to quote Nietzsche, "the eternal return"—of what was once declared passé. This "return," however, is not a copy of the past but a manifestation of it in new circumstances, on a different level, on a different scale. To the question of what has caused such a leap backward, there is no simple answer. The steep rise in the prices of contemporary art in the 1980s, and their subsequent fall, were among the factors. The artificial price inflation was meant to convince people who didn't know much about art that it was still a profitable business, a sensible investment. One should not forget that corporate wheeler-dealers and wealthy investors suffered from a moral inferiority complex vis-à-vis their opposites—artists, servants of

"true art" who "would rather be poor than corrupt," etc. The acquisition of a painting was a way of atoning for one's sins, of communing with the world of authentic being.

In the early 1990s, falling art prices resulted in two developments: (1) corporations that had invested in art forswore any trust in the art market as a means of increasing their capital; (2) the reputation of art, which had been corrupted over the past decade, was hopelessly damaged; investors suddenly realized that they were no different from the inventors, since the artists were just as greedy for fame and money as big businessmen, politicians, Hollywood stars, supermodels, and other mass culture idols. What happened as a result of this crash? The practice of art certainly didn't disappear (as Baudrillard had naively predicted); rather, there was a temporary breakup between art and life, between art and lifestyles of the 1980s which more recent art, alas, cannot afford. Unable to compete with the mass media and societal spectacles, art in the West once again began to aspire toward a hermit-like, reclusive, monastic situation, reminiscent of "nonconformist" art in Moscow under the Soviet regime. Ritual has become far cheaper than culture, in the sense that mystical depths do not require extraordinary expenses—especially since the stage for this ritual is limited to the artist's workshop or the darkened rooms of alternative exhibitions. Hence the attempt to go back to "auraticity," to a ritualized mode of production and representation. The interest in installations merely confirms this. The installation is a doghouse where contemporary art mourns its defeat and licks its wounds after suffering a fiasco in its relationship with life; this is the place to rest before a new offense . . . quite possibly in the same direction as before.

2.

The point of reference for this chapter is Damien Hirst's sensational (due to its scope and ambition) show at the Larry Gagosian gallery (New York) in fall 2000. Titled "Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results, and Findings," it became a topic of a conversation between Kabakov, Margarita Tupitsyn, and myself—a trialogue we recorded in early December 2000. Since the publication of this trialogue in its entirety is a separate project,[1] I will limit myself here to summarizing parts of it, either quoting or paraphrasing in my own words. Simultaneously, I will formulate my own position and my view of the statements made by my interlocutors.

In the first part of the conversation, Kabakov characterized the situation of the art world today as "a blow, like being hit over the head with a bag." In his words, "the peculiarity of this recent blow is that the strategies

have changed, since the blows delivered in art today affect spheres that are not described by the art world. In fact, they bypass the art world as such. As a result, the shock experienced today by artists, critics, and other casualties is deeper than ever." Kabakov places the blame for this shock on several artists of the new generation, on museum directors, and on institutions whose actions, in his view, are transforming art culture into a global spectacle for tourists who are permanently moving within a range from Taiwan to South America. To refer to this new phenomenon, Kabakov employs such terms as "carpet bombing" and "carpet Apocalypse."

According to Kabakov, the spectator's route today is controlled and lacks independence, in the sense that "the local zone of the museum visitor has been completely de-intimized [stripped of intimacy]." In his opinion, the people who set the policies at museums are essentially not a part of the art world. That is to say, they are not servants of art but "some sort of unbelievable politicians, illusionists, or medical experimenters—you go in and they'll sew a new arm on you." In other words, "these are people of a more totalistic nature, and if you start squawking about art, they'll tell you: We'll talk later."

Kabakov does not believe that Gagosian is simply a representative of the art world and Hirst is only an artist. For him, they are international businessmen who work in tandem with museums, auctions, price-hiking devices, and with everything that constitutes and contributes to the politics of art today. What Kabakov means by the politics of art is "total penetration of economic spheres, in relation to which the zone of art is either a superficial layer or an insignificant part of a general structure." In his view, anyone within this structure who is "fixated on the zone of art is today doomed to extinction."

Kabakov gives a vivid and caustic description of the (failed) project for the new Guggenheim building in downtown New York, characterizing it as "an enormous lopsided barrel, a giant bubble." He is convinced that nothing will be kept in such a museum, while New Yorkers (like Venetians) are fated to become "the service personnel for millions of Japanese, Chinese, Australian and other visitors who will flow into the Guggenheim bubble for a couple of hours, have a cup of coffee and then flow out through other apertures and disappear into the airport. Thus, the model of this building is a museum in appearance only." Kabakov has said many times and on many occasions that "a museum serves as a church, which until recently held a monopoly on everything high—i.e., oversaw the realm of the metaphysical and the mystical. Today, the place of the church has been completely taken over by the museum. The museum oversees the past, since it is connected to the memory of our

human origins." But the truth of the matter is that the mnemonic functions performed in museums or in reference to them are utterly reflective of the things these institutions present or hold on to. As a result, all "free range" signifiers—especially those that partake in our identificatory efforts—become fastened up and pinned to certain items, whether artworks or cultural memorabilia. In such places, everything (including our reflections on the past) can be instantly objectified (museological objectification). In other words, this is not memory but *Kulturindustrie* (culture industry) of memory. As Margarita Tupitsyn noted, the museum is a type of "multicultural church where a person is allowed to enter regardless of aesthetic beliefs."

In Kabakov's words, "the first thing that leaps out at Hirst's exhibition... is Sol Le Witt's cubes which he covered with glass and filled with water. It's a clever move, since references to tradition have a calming and disarming effect." "What is a working memory?" Kabakov asks. "It means being connected to one's past, because culture in general is built on continuity, on correlation with a past—a revolutionary one, or any other kind. After all, if there is no past, there is no future, either. Then what is there? There is a very narrow crack between morning and evening. I encounter the world, as it were, upon waking up in the morning. And then I act with the energy required of me in the situation—the spatial situation of today. 'Today' is a spatial concept, not a temporal one. I don't think about what will happen tomorrow, because tomorrow the next blow will be delivered, and yet another character will show up in the art world."

3.

The fragment quoted above deserves a commentary, particularly the phrase "a very narrow crack." A narrow crack is what allows events to be snatched out of context, in accordance with the criteria established by the mass media. The complaints about taking things out of context generally have to do with content, though it seems to me that a great deal depends on form. One example is the dynamic of the transmission of visual images and the time limits imposed on their perception. The real issue is that the flow of information disgorged upon us by television screens is a sea that is an inch deep—a sea made not only spatially but temporally shallow. Everything costs infernal amounts of money, be it a commercial, the latest sports headline, or an attempt to assassinate the president. Because TV time is so expensive, units of information are shortened almost beyond recognition. They end up being amputated, and people get used to a diet of shortened thoughts, shortened plots and narratives. In other words, these are not whole numbers but fractional ones.[2] As was suggested in chapter 10, our

perception is already programmed in such a way that we react exclusively to fractions of phenomena, events, and experiences. Therefore, when there is an opportunity to take a deeper look at something or to evaluate the true scope of what is happening, we become confused, having gotten used to surrogates and partiality. We have adjusted to watching the world through a "crack," and when somebody discovers that an entire world can fit into such a crack, it is stunning. It creates an illusion that if you open up the fractions of seconds to which the mass media have gotten us accustomed, the resulting opening will familiarize us with the totality of the scene in which everything is taken into account, put on record, and given a place. This media technique—the technique of manipulating fragments in order to endow them with the false (or exaggerated) sense of universality—is precisely what Hirst's strategy relies on. The viewer's willingness to accept it is made possible because, tired of feeding on the fractional and dissatisfied by partiality, we cry out for compensation. The spectacle at the Gagosian Gallery (that is, "Theories, Models, Methods . . .") turned out to be precisely such compensation.[3]

4.

In contrast to artists who give preference to the aesthetic of deviations and incongruities, what is striking about Hirst's career is its unbelievably precise fit with well-worn psychopathological clichés. Starting with his early conceptual works, he showed an interest in items used during autopsies of dead bodies. His then-unconscious identification with a coroner was later transferred to slicing open cows, pigs, and sharks—a period that can be defined as a recurrence of the childhood experience of partiality (see fig. 10.4). This feeling of partiality, which has to do with the lack of a "completeness of the image," is experienced by children in the mirror stage, while adults such as Hirst continue to go back to the metaphor of partiality but on the level of other problems and other symbolic contexts. In his case, yet another change in symbolic entourage was expressed in the transfer of the stigma of partiality from the industry of Physis to the industry of Poesis, in which Hirst sees his own reflection. In this latest, narcissistic stage, he has enclosed upon himself the trajectory of the transfer tested on cows and sharks. What is important, too, is that Hirst has represented the artist as an inalienable part of the eschatological economy, as inalienable as art itself. In his work, the longing for totality, unattainable in the mirror stage, turns into the totality of death—the death of art, the end of the autonomous. Its autopsy is not only carried out but aestheticized, thereby contributing to what the narcissistic ego contemplates in death—the "completeness of the image" as a compensation for its unattainability by

other means. And this is what finally unites Hirst with the Guggenheim's director Thomas Krens and the architect Frank Gehry.

As is well known, the principal pathos of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* has to do with its author's desire to prevent the transformation of autonomous art into a culture industry. Such a transformation is undergone by every artistic phenomenon that leaves the zone of de-reified activity. Given the inevitability of reification (*Verdinglichung*), the goal of the critically thinking artist is to delay it. However appealing, Adorno's arguments have for the most part lost their effectiveness. The reason for this is the expansion of the culture industry into the sphere of the optical unconscious, as well as the instantaneous mimetic exchange (mimetic reciprocation) between them that has been inspired by new technologies. That which Adorno regarded as nonidentical to the culture industry turns out to be contaminated by it even before the moment of reification.[4] Due to the mass media and the phenomenon of instantaneous exchange, the temporal gap between art and its Other has ceased to exist. Having reached this state, art (read: autonomous art) has reached its own death, which—like everything else—is no longer its Other. However cynical, this was precisely the message that Hirst's "Theories, Models, Methods, . . ." conveyed to the viewer: art is dead, it no longer exists, but this theme itself is art.

But let us return to Kabakov, for whom "art today is show business."[5] Needless to say, he makes this comment with sarcasm, adding that "no one will pay money unless you propose some system of theatrical or circus tricks." Everything is based on shock-inducing effects, since shock and aggression turn any episode into a spectacle. On the one hand, everything has turned into politics—but then the presidential elections begin, and we see that everything has turned into theater. If this has been "engineered" by someone, it was probably so that we, too, could develop a depoliticized attitude toward reality and learn to see it as theater.

In Kabakov's view, "until very recently, artists believed that the art world must defend itself from other worlds. The sensational news is that the art world no longer exists as a fortified camp or city. Instead of fortified walls, we are now defended by tolerance and calm." On the other hand, "there have been periods when radicalism and transgression were not empty sounds. Without them, even if art history could go somewhere, it would have been strictly in a chronological sense." Margarita Tupitsyn backs up this opinion with a reference to Hans Haacke, whose "exposés of the sordid situations taking place in the wings of the art scene made him a hero to radical critics and curators. At one time, they were called 'grouches' because they got on people's nerves and didn't allow such situations to become routine. Today, they've gotten old and have become

professors. But new 'grouches,' alas, have not emerged. Generally speaking, what used to be considered avant-garde now automatically makes you retrograde. Some sort of criteria must be developed."

Criteria, Kabakov argues, "can be developed on the basis of past experience—starting, for instance, with the idea of radicalism, which so greatly disturbs us all because we see it as an absolute and final severing of all connections. But in fact, only the radicals have survived in memory." Reflecting on the difference between the radicals of past eras and those who continue the traditions of political activism in modern culture, Margarita Tupitsyn pointed out that the art Kabakov and like-minded artists produced in the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s was also associated with politics: "The question is, with what kind of politics? There is no greater terminological (and ideological) confusion than the one on this subject in the West.[6] To this, one can add that the [conservative] politics underlying the dynamics of the artistic process [today] has to do, first and foremost, with banks, corporations, and wealthy art patrons who always 'know exactly' what art must and mustn't be. It's precisely because the connection between art and radical politics has been severed that it has become harder for us to invest a work of art with any functions except for aesthetic ones."

In all probability, not only external but internal connections have been severed as well. Politics has ceased to be identical to itself, to its structures and definitions, to its teleology. Just as we don't know whether art remains an artistic phenomenon, we no longer know whether politics remains a political phenomenon. And this is not merely because political reality appears to us in a nonpolitical guise: today, politics is practically everything, to say nothing of the relativity of the concept of political radicalism. The "political *epoché*" has lost its meaning, and we are all the losers for it. Even though the triangulation of politics has become an ambiguous venture, we would like to believe in the existence of something politically visible, something with clear conceptual contours, weight, and span. For the French, for instance, the last time the meaning of "radical politics" was absolutely clear was in May 1968. In Iran, it was in the 1980s; as for Russia, there the radical restoration of capitalism took place in the early 1990s. On the one hand, political acts—institutional or contractual, public or private—cannot be separated from nonpolitical ones. On the other hand, despite the hopelessness of this enterprise, we continue to put the world through the sieve of political reduction.

Clearly, in order for political activity—individual or collective—to manifest itself, we must clearly understand the situation in the world and the situation around us, and also what kind of action must be taken in

order to assist the revolutionary struggle or the bloodless implementation of social programs. Achieving this goal is actually a complex and responsible task—especially today, when we are all stuffed full of contradictory information and impressions, visual and otherwise. In this context, the notion of political orientation has become extremely muddled. It bears a resemblance to what J.-F. Lyotard defined as the *différend*—a conflict that does not fit within the framework of existing standards, whether logical, legal, lexical, and so forth.[7] For Lyotard, the *différend* was akin to a snowflake that falls on one's hand, only to melt away immediately. Today, this snowflake has turned into a snowball, which grows as it rolls downhill and turns into a global *différend*. Apparently, the number of existing standards can no longer be counted. Like snow, they envelop social and moral problems and the problems of cultural politics. Such a "snowball effect" makes it difficult to adopt enlightened decisions, and hence engenders cynicism. Thus, the furor surrounding "Theories, Models, Methods, . . ." or the new Guggenheim building project was a cynical display of indifference toward art's integration into the culture industry—an event that I find reminiscent of a funeral banquet. This funeral wake has already become a "new" style, and can go on forever, generating cycles and repetitions, as well as requiring the creation of suitable props and sets. Such is the soil in which the new aesthetic will bloom, the aesthetic of the funeral, the art of mourning art. This era may turn out to be longer and more "fruitful" than all the preceding periods.

Reacting to these ideas, which I expressed during our trialogue, Kabakov noted that this argument "reflects the position of the defeated. The question arises: should the situation be viewed as hopeless? Another possibility is to ignore the question itself and to go on living as if nothing happened. Or a third option: to mount something in opposition, something no less active. These are the three strategies." In response to Kabakov's remark, I clarified my position somewhat, saying that if autonomous art becomes a part of the culture industry before it has even had a chance to be born, then the only justification for it is political activism. It's better to be socially engaged than to saturate the art market with "timeless" artistic treasures while thinking that you are shaking the foundations of the world or fighting for creative freedom. And yet it would be naive to expect all the artists and critics to quit what they do and join a punitive expedition or crusade against the culture industry. The point, however, is that those who easily submit their minds and souls to the culture industry are not automatically rewarded by it. To corrupt an adversary (not an ally) is global capitalism's top priority. As a result, some of its fiercest opponents end up being its most celebrated converts.[8] That is why, given

the growing incoherence of many opinions (including my own), I try to clarify for myself what political activism and political orientation can mean in this situation. The choice of the so-called "third way" depends on this. But as long as such a way does not exist (or remains unknown), griping against Krens, Hirst, or Jeff Koons is just as senseless as calling a funeral home to protest the existence of death.

In the meanwhile, the image-making media's invasion of our psychic space can be dealt with in such a way that it would impel this imagery and its visual rhetoric to incriminate itself. This is exactly what Derrida calls "*a* deconstruction"[9] (as opposed to *the* deconstruction, for there are numerous ways of doing it). The point is that the culture industry is reminiscent of Narcissus admiring his own reflection and contemplating suicide. All we can do is to help it kill itself, just as the water surface that reflected Narcissus's image did. And that's precisely why the deconstructionist must remain indifferent.[10] Otherwise, the water will be rippled and the Narcissus of the culture industry will not be able to see its "flawless" face.

As for the possibility of a "third way," it would probably lead to a struggle for the liberation of humanity from a "bad habit"—creativity. This utopian project aimed at "the creation of a noncreative state" (which I discussed in chapter 10) is the ultimate recipe for those who believe that creativity is what the culture industry feeds on. The obstacle, however, is that were there ever to be a person who, from the moment of birth, was known to be completely devoid of the creative reflex, such a mythical "role model" would have undoubtedly become "creatively" processed and absorbed into the culture industry.

In the early 1990s, Kabakov described his installations as total. At the same time, their totality was significantly limited by the boundaries of the art scene. Everything beyond that scene was perceived as the Other of art and regarded as unsuitable for artification. Hirst redefined the concept of the total by abolishing the boundaries between autonomous art and the culture industry. This, rather than the artistic merits (or flaws) of his "Theories, Models, Methods, . . . ," explains the vehement reaction to the show by Kabakov and other artists of his generation, his era. As it turned out, the total crumbles not only when some of its fragments fall out but also when it becomes conscious of itself as a fragment of an even greater totality.

Before I conclude, I will comment on some issues concerning Kabakov's success in the West. His success seems to have been due not only to his talent and intelligence but also to the process of recontextualization itself. During Kabakov's career in the West (i.e., since 1987), his numerous installations have successfully neutralized the problem of the referent and the

12.1
Installation view of Ilya Kabakov's *Transmission of Energy,* at the exhibition "Expensive Art," Palace of Youth, Moscow, 1989.

referential context. At present, when answering the question, "What is this artist's purpose and what do his works point to?" the enlightened spectator in New York, Frankfurt, or London goes back mentally not to the mysterious context of Russia, but to Kabakov's earlier exhibitions in the West. In other words, the "Ur-scene" or the "Ur-text" now is not Russia itself but its image created in Kabakov's early installations of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Such is the final balance sheet of the exhibition marathon that made it possible for the artist to succeed at what could be called the *cloning* of the referent. This has given his art and his exhibitions in the West a diachronic dimension that visiting artists from Russia rarely have the time to establish (figs. 12.1, 12.2).

12.2
Ilya Kabakov shows his works to other conceptual artists, Kabakov's studio, Moscow, 1980. Photo Georgii Kizeval'ter.