The Human Centipede, A View From the Art World

Can art do anything? Is it possible to understand the function of art within any consequential prescriptive or interventionist mode synchronous with the descriptive resources of the modern system of knowledge? In other words, does art have any import for a project of construction aimed at liberation of intelligence, illiberalization of freedom, and collective enhancement—i.e. 'accelerationism'? The positive answer to this question, it will be argued, hinges on a systematic extrication of the definition of art from the contemporary art world. Aimed at debunking the more ambitious claims of the art world with regard to speculative vistas and political vocations, this presentation involves an etiological scrutiny into the premises of two international group art exhibitions, '*Speculation On Anonymous Materials*' [Fridericianum, Kassel, Sep 2013 – Jan 2014] and '*and Materials and Money and Crisis*' [Mumok, Vienna, Nov 2013 – Feb 2014]. Underlining major tendencies of the art world in its search for contemporaneity and pertinence, these exhibitions accentuate the two faces of the same art world currency: longing for the outside and critical self-reflection. One through producing impersonal experience and a diversification of the bijective space of affect into a myriad of relations and complicities, and the other through a politically sober introspection into the conditions under which its horizon has been integrated.

However, both of these enterprises—both accelerative projection and decelerative reflection—are, symptomatically as we shall argue, retrofitted into a world of cognitive templates whose nebulizing function creates a cultural fog of conceptual conflation and practical impotence. It is under the cover of this operative fog that some of the more insidious mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism are directly plugged into our cognitive infrastructure under the auspices of a world that appears earnest in its desire to extend the plasticity of imagination and expand the frontiers of action. But this is a world in which the financial closure of capitalism is cloned and grafted onto a cognitively maimed economy that accumulates false alternatives in the name of liberation of imagination and action—no different from the endlessly proliferating lifestyle options that capitalism offers us. A suture of different overambitious vocations, driven by the wealth of waste it generates, the resulting beast is a prophetic vision of a tightly connected and controlled society with a single closed alimentary circuit: the human centipede. Those who scheme to infiltrate this world in order to militantly or cunningly liberate it from the inside are locked into the compactly segmented structure of the metameric organism. At once necessary for growth yet expendable, every insider is a new addition to the iterated sequence of mouths and rectums through which the art world bootstraps itself—a miracle made possible by a simple but efficacious financial and cognitive algorithm. Dreams of acceleration or deceleration, speculative enthusiasm for the

outside or critical self-reflection, are revealed to be simply changes of frequency in the rate of the said iteration.

The allegory of the human centipede does not symbolize capitalism, just as the art world should not be understood as a personified microcosmic model of capitalism. It is the art world that is an allegory, of environments and domains in which both acceleration and deceleration, flight for the fresh air and ascetic slowdown for the purpose of self-analysis, are but distant dreams. The human centipede is simply the embodiment of this allegory.

These two shows merely exemplify two tendencies representing accelerative and decelerative scenarios which characterize the progressive and supposedly enlightened sectors of the contemporary art world. It is important to not overemphasize the function of an example: an example represents a general situation, it should not be over-particularized. The goal is not to create victims through over-particularization and set in motion the ever-twisting chain of victimhood, but to provoke and generate an environment where the impersonal cruelty of critique can gain an infectious momentum and become a critical epidemic in which the victim and the executioner are indifferently buried forever, an ebola with no chance of inoculation. But that having been said, these two examples are especially pertinent.

The truth is that one of these two shows is forthcoming and the other one opened only recently. Evidently, I have neither visited these shows nor know anything more about them than what is in the press release. I make no apology for this, it was precisely a decisive factor in choosing them. In other words, I have deliberately chosen to be ignorant about the full scope of these shows. This is what I would call a ‘tactical ignorance’. One may object: you have not seen the art, you have not read the accompanying catalogue that explains what these shows are about, you have only read the press release... The answer to these objections is fourfold, and most definitely forms an element of the critique itself:

1. In the contemporary art world, the press release is an existential alibi. It serves as a theoretical template that defines the terms of integration and basic premises of the exhibition. Let’s for a moment forget its essential financial purpose, that of shoring up value through critical legitimation, which is whitewashed under the vague concept of theory and aboutness (this art is about such and such). In terms of their contents, the artworks displayed in these shows may be vastly in excess of the questionable press release, which reflects the terms of integration for the group shows. But then doesn’t this acquiescence to groundless curatorial decisions bespeak the artists' complacency and blind submission?

2. On the other hand, if these press releases in fact *don't* reflect the real premises of the show's existence, then what are they exactly? We might just as well replace them with different permutations of claims and topics i.e. entirely different press releases—an interchangeability which indeed often does obtain in reality.

3. Artworks in contemporary group shows are thematically and curatorially promiscuous. They are interchangeable and expendable, today they can be displayed in a show about money and crisis, tomorrow about object-oriented philosophy, and the day after that, the Occupy Wall Street movement. But this is not the interchangability of the artworks per se, it is the interchangability of their content. Once the content becomes interchangeable, the artwork becomes indeterminate. What axiomatizes their relations, even before artists can diversify or violate them, is the press release as a decisional mould into which everything can be cast. In an axiomatic environment, there is only so much can be done to complexify and transgress the plane of consistency of axioms. Working under curatorial axiomatization is not just a practical compromise that can be turned into an enabling condition, it is the submission of the artist's claims and interventions to a pulverizing force of retroactive obstruction and perversion.

4. The most significant point here is the one made by Michael Ferrer regarding the "interesting perspective"—the same "Interesting Perspective" on the artwork that is presented by never-ending catalogues and curatorial commentaries. "Being the hallmark of Post-this and that cultural theory," Ferrer points out, "the interesting perspective is a matter of treating as binding an interpretation of materials the ur-interpretation of which is already their 'negative under-determination,' and hence to 'own' from the perspective of hack-conceptualization the 'meaning' of works that are supposed to be resistant to determinant conceptualization." Catalogues, the primary medium of interesting perspectives, are of course media for the appropriation of philosophy into interesting theory. But there is even a more instrumental role to the existence of catalogues. They ensure the concealment of what Peter Wolfendale calls the 'placebo affect' of contemporary art: the idea that the nebulously defined and presented artwork forces an interesting perspective upon the spectator whose free-roaming cognitive anticipation has been trained by the art world to yield an affect, to make an interesting reaction to the art. Whereas the gallery, the press release, the real time atmosphere of the show force the spectator, who is the true laborer of the contemporary art world, to afford an affect, the catalogue makes sure that the 'sugar affect' is digested as if it was the real thing all along. The catalogue, to this extent, depending on how and when it reaches the spectator, either transforms and channels the placebo affect into canonical interesting perspectives which in turn play the role of critical axiomatization and financial

canalization or pre-emptively particularizes the generic experience of the spectator who is about to interact with the artwork.

The ‘interesting perspectives’ of the art world are precisely the cognitive clones of neoliberal false alternatives, devices that overcompensate for a negative under-determination and mime a therapeutic effect for complications which lack real causes, while leaving real problems intact. In refusing to acknowledge these interesting perspectives or regime of choices, one risks being considered as lamentably unfamiliar with subtle complexities, or perhaps even as a cognitive brute in the eyes of neoliberalism or the art world. But the sheer opacity of this concept of complexity is a marker of its inaccessible vacuity. Complexity in this sense is just a culturally up-to-date name for mystifying ineffability.

False alternatives and interesting perspectives are nebulizing agents whose fogging effect suffocates any true universalist ambition, and inhibits any real choices of action that might cut through the status quo. In encountering false alternatives and interesting perspectives, we ought to tell neoliberalism and the art world, “Thank you, we respectfully refuse to play your games.” False alternatives should not be engaged with, they must be ignored. To challenge power, we ought not challenge it on its own terms. In finding a way out, one has to tactically evade the trap, not bow before it.

Both neoliberalism and the contemporary art world are socio-politically destructive in that they ensnare imagination through the counterfeit plastic medium of false alternatives, bogus choices and interesting perspectives. The function of imagination is to generate catastrophes for thinking, and the function of thought with regard to imagination is to escape the limits of imagination. The feedback loop between rational thinking and imagination is what highlights the ways out and inspires new modes of action or the grasping of opportunities outside of the immediate resources and opportunities of the here and now. But once imagination is rerouted into the regime of false alternatives and affordable choices, the feedback loop between thinking and imagination is effectively hijacked. Seizing the control of this loop in turn ensures a unique influence on the pivotal loop between thinking and action. All actions from now on seem more or less liberating because in fact none of them are. In short, the net surfeit of false alternatives supplied under the rubric of liberal freedom causes a terminal deficit of real alternatives, establishing as an axiom for thought and action that there is indeed no alternative. This is the face proper of capitalist realism, for which real alternatives are deemed mere fantasies. In the same vein, appeal to popularity (not populism), functional accountability and determination, technological production and the hypothesizing edge of design in order to abduce and inspire pathways outside of the regional and planetary quagmires are dismissed as chimeric delusions. For compared to the real business of

peddling expensive furniture with deep meanings to rich people, every imaginative feat of collective design and action is a fanciful daydream.

One does not walk into a thicker cultural fog of false alternatives than what we are already in. But as Ferrer suggests, the mission is to freeze the fog and break it into pieces. So as to pick up the shattered bits and inspect them more closely. But also to neutralize the medium of deflection through which the art world or neoliberalism infinitely deflects the pointer of critique and passes it on so as to defuse the shockwave of critique and mitigate it into a mere rippling of the swamp. To demystify and challenge the human centipede, one must acknowledge its segmented structure, to deprive the centipede of its daily fodder, the deflection of fault, through a collectivizing solidarity, and then proceed with fragmenting it. What connects these segments is a financial current driven by artworks as tokens for the circulation of a specialized form of capital. As long as the financial link is fully intact, as long as there is a financially vested interest at stake, the meaningful insider critique of the art is perpetually deferred and staved off. If debunking signifies the disenthrallment of real critique, and if debunking marks the threshold of tolerance at which critique is perceived as a financial liability, then it should be ensured that debunking is purged from the function of critique. But this debunking function as what interferes with the real of the work's circulation as exchange value rather than enriching its purportedly meaningful contradictions is not simply the criticism of the content or the exposé of its absence. Instead it is a critique that seeks to locate, arrest and hollow out the link between the financial infrastructure and the content or artistic claims that it posits. With an upper limit or a short leash imposed on critique, to criticize means to stealthily advertise, and critical self-reflection signifies remaining and behaving within the bounds of affordable critique—which is a matter of financial risk assessment, not reflection.

Immersed in the cognition-maiming fog of false alternatives and interesting perspectives, and embedded in an abnormal financial self-reflexivity qua the centipede, self-reflection in the sense of "addressing the matter of capital as it exists in the artwork" sounds less of a misguided claim and more of an insidious gesture. Insidious insofar as it dissimulates this disabling condition as a celebrated moment of critical reflection. But the risk-conscious self-reflexivity of the art world into which reflection is forced is but the financial immanence of the reflection. Whereas reflection attempts to gain traction on this subterranean plane in the name of gaining access to "the crisis inducing disruption of money and materials", the financial immanence enforces – in the manner of trauma – a unilateralizing effect that deprives reflection of its omniscient power. The meta-level that reflection utilizes as its vantage point becomes a locus of repression posited by the unattainable trauma of finance. In attempting to access the financial immanence of itself, the critical self-reflection of the art

world is driven to repeat its own repression again and again, into increasingly twisted scenarios of “speculation and derivation”. In insisting on reflecting on its own materio-financial immanence, whose risk-sensitivity makes it foreclosed to real intercepting critique, the critical artist or the curator turns itself into the unconscious and impotent spectator of its own disabling condition. It is precisely this impotent spectator that, in the contemporary art world, masquerades as the ideal and responsibly critical spectator of art.

The secret name of abnormal money is material, but it is a love that dare not speak its name unless through a mutually understood allusion to an unintelligible materiality. As a codified avatar, the ‘material’ through which contemporary art verifies its authenticity is a ubiquitous multi-modal interface that transfers and translates the financial real into a logistically convenient portable medium, a tangible object, a conceptually permutable content, a manifest placeholder for imagination and the dummy work-site of the artist, all with utter fluency. Yet by virtue of being anchored in a special form of experience that defines it, art has only access to the functional and logical properties of appearances. But in order for any pertinent material intervention or manipulation to be possible, material must be made intelligible. However, the intelligibility of the material which also warrants the pertinence of material intervention and manipulation can only be extracted by way of accessing different explanatory-organizational levels which in reality define and shape what materiality means. Each of these explanatory-organizational levels is endowed with its own functional explanations, descriptive organizations, optimal inferential pathways and truth-values, discontinuous to other levels. In other words, materiality consists in the inferential organization of different and non-extendable functional, explanatory and descriptive levels. Art cannot access these explanatory levels unless it overextends its model of appearances or employs models borrowed from fundamental and socio-political sciences. Art cannot succeed in accessing these explanatory levels by merely overextending its model of appearance. It may succeed better by borrowing models from fundamental and socio-political sciences. But insofar as art is a local operator of thought and action, it can only afford models from other disciplines which do not compromise its central integrity and basic conceptual-financial assumptions. Since it literally *cannot afford* to access different explanatory levels of the material or to navigate the inferential links between them, all art knows of materiality is ‘stuff’—namely, functionally and descriptively dumbed-down explanatory flatness. Theoretical and practical engagement with matter and materiality, it is but the ill-formed and ill-defined world of stuff so descriptively impoverished and so prescriptively retarded that is incapable of acknowledging its own stuffness. The seasonal migration of the art world toward object oriented ontology is the logical and inexorable consequence of its impoverished yet omnipresent materiality. All it knows or wants to know is anonymous materials, new materialism, the so-called authenticity of the material, a materiality that matters. The

centrality of generic materiality to the contemporary art is so prevalent that it animates the allegory of the human centipede in its full effect: the arthuman centipede delineates the trajectory of brain fogging and financially codified 'stuff': whatever stuff goes in, comes out, whatever comes out, goes in. The centipede grows from the loose but financially color-coded excreta it fattens on. And each part in the chain suffers a worse fate than the last.

Effective description of material can only proceed through the intelligibility of its various explanatory levels. And any pertinence of a prescription or intervention, in turn, is predicated upon such functional organization of description. Therefore, materiality can only be omnipresent through compressing different and discontinuous explanatory levels together, in effect through shrinking their descriptive roles, retarding their organizational complexity and neutralizing their functional or interventionist import. In other words, it is omnipresent because it is indiscriminatory and conflated. Insofar as only explanatory levels of the material undergird the intelligibility of the description and the pertinence of the prescription or intervention, omnipresent materiality qua stuff as the existential register of the art world is a testament to both its descriptive and prescriptive deficiency. After all, how can artists dream of critical or impersonal interventions when they cannot even intervene with the curatorial interventions of their own shows with regard to materiality and anonymous materials? One might object: why should we need to know about various descriptive-explanatory levels in order to prescribe or intervene? Surely art has its own know-how, its own set of spontaneous instructions? This is simply the question of why we need knowledge in order to do something. Firstly, spontaneous and description-independent prescription is but the reinscription of the myth of the given at the level of prescription. While even the most rudimentary description is fraught with minimal prescriptions—namely, inferential oughts—material intervention or pertinent prescription can only be bootstrapped from a hierarchy of explanatory-descriptive levels held together by correct inferential links. Indeed prescription is but the functional organization of a multi-leveled explanatory-descriptive hierarchy. It is this functional organization that represents the non-isomorphy and asymmetry between descriptions and prescriptions, while at the same time allowing the demystifying decomposition of prescriptions into units of knowledge, know-hows into know-thats. To the extent that there is no isolated know-that or unit of knowledge because modern knowledge is a global integrative structure, the descriptive know-thats of art must be synchronized—but not sutured—with know-thats of the modern system of knowledge. Accordingly, intervention entails not only functional organization of descriptions but also their global updating and synchronization with descriptive resources of modern knowledge. Interventions target and manipulate inferential and organizational links between different explanatory and functional levels. That's how, as James Woodward puts it, interventions study the causal fabric and make things happen. Each intervention or designated action has an implicit prescriptive organization and import

even if it does not directly prescribe anything. Description without prescription is the germ of resignation, prescription without descriptions is whim. The responsible art world seems to have sided with the frivolity of the latter as the blue print of its interventions.

An environment that celebrates the retardation of intervention as a form of intervention is not a site of construction, and therefore not a medium of collective enhancement and edification. It is an apparatus of stagnation and comprehensive backwardness. It is true that it is not the system that is the enemy, but the enemy of the system. Because the system is merely a dynamic integration of local-global tendencies, it evolves by way of anti-foundational disturbances. The system turns local perturbations into opportunities for manipulation and construction, global perturbations into discontinuities or orientations endowed with radical transformation. Once the constructible and hypothetical nature of the system is embraced and activated, the system is revealed as a medium of collectivization and enhancement, freedom and justice. Therefore, a prescription genuinely aimed at collective enhancement and freedom never orders subtraction from the system into communitarian negativity. But the catch is that the art world is not a system, it does not reconstitute itself by way of channeling and distributing perturbations, it does not want disturbances, it cannot navigate the functional organization that makes intervention possible, it does not embrace the catastrophic rearrangement of parameters responsible for the behavior of the system, it does not orient itself toward the future, instead it parasitizes the detritus of the past and the present. In subtracting oneself from the art world, one does not risk resignation or primitivism. The art world is not a system, it is a self-sequestering local niche, it is a trap. To think and act on freedom, to restore the dignity of imagination, to accelerate and decelerate when necessary, one must escape from the trap, not abide in it. So long as we cognitively and practically adapt to the local niche of the art world, there is not much hope of developing a definition of art aimed at collective enhancement and consequentiality. Sink and abandon the ship.

Let us go back a few steps and ask a genuine question: But what about us, entrapped in the human centipede? The promotion of accountability, restoring the artists' interventionist responsibilities against curatorial interventions, the resistance against 'conceptual promiscuity in the name of creativity', the discontinuing of the investment in interesting perspectives, the proliferation of the designated cruelty of critique, the antagonization of aboutness, … the list of these resolute and practical but demanding tasks which sould be taken one at a time goes on—and then maybe once the fog is cleared, a real solution can be thought.

You my dear friends, all of you, or more precisely, all of 'us' who are associated with the art world, we are all infinite champions of empty posturing. We have turned art into the last

bastion of human narcissism, the art world is now an organon of disingenuity. You think you are an exception; no, you are not. There is no exceptional ‘me’ in the human centipede. There is no possible allusion to the outside other than by systematically avoiding deflection through solidarity and a responsible collectivization. The centipede feeds on deflection so as to turn it into resignation or an elusive evil or register of power that prevents action because it always evades encounter. But methodological collectivism is a labor and a hegemonic conduct whose initial condition consists of individual responsibilities. It is not a matter of being grouped in pre-constructed contexts of collectivity in the name of curation or liberation of the individual from its individuality. Such well-curated template-collectivities inhibit the labor of collectivization, mitigate responsibility and dampen the collective action which is but the kernel of acceleration. Cheated out of the opportunity to form a methodological collectivism, liberation of complex abilities between thinking and action required for non-trivial orientation and hypothesizing situations better than what is or has been the case is indefinitely suspended. Misery is the deferral of enhancement through the obstruction of collectivization as a constructible hypothesis and a normative labor that realizes itself not because of contexts of gathering but in spite of them.

This critique might appear as a lighthearted joke at which one is compelled to nervously smile. But there is nothing humorous about human misery and contributing to it. It is neither an interesting perspective nor a deflectable fact, it is the avoidable truth of the contemporary world.