

Performatism in Art

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Anyone following the international art scene for the last ten years or so will have no trouble identifying developments that are difficult to reconcile with the practice and theory of postmodern art.⁽¹⁾ These include a renewed interest in beauty and the discipline of aesthetics, a new seriousness or lack of manifest irony, a renaissance of painting (as opposed to performance art and installations) as well as a tendency towards projecting unity and totality in works of art. As in other branches of culture, however, no critic and no artist up to now has been willing to connect the dots, as it were, to form the picture of a whole epoch that is opposed to postmodernism and that is gradually beginning to replace it. In the follow remarks I would like to show that art—no less than literature, philosophy, film, and architecture—has entered into a stage that can best be understood using the monist, no longer poststructuralist or postmodern concepts of performatism.

Within this limited space it is not possible to provide anything resembling an exhaustive, step-by-step description of how performatism took hold in the world of art. To keep the discussion to the point, I've limited myself to five well-known artists working in three different kinds of media: Vanessa Beecroft in performance art, Andreas Gursky and Thomas Demand in photography, and Neo Rauch and Tim Eitel in painting. All the artists are important figures in their fields; all belong to a generation that came to prominence in the mid-to-late 1990's. These artists, in spite of their seeming diversity, are not pursuing idiosyncratic, unrelated styles or concepts, and they are not merely new twists in the endlessly unfolding field of postmodernism. Rather, they are part of a broader pattern of innovation that is entirely in keeping with the move towards monism in the other arts as well as in theory.

Before I start describing performatism in art, a few additional explanations are in order. In the hypothetical originary scene as described by Eric Gans (cf. 1993, 1-27), there are three basic positions that may be taken in regard to the ostensive sign, which arises in intuitive mutual agreement between two or more heretofore speechless protohumans and as yet has no signified or meaning. If the thing is

perceived as blocking access to the transcendent, reconciliatory power of the sign, the result is the sacral, or religion. Alternately, if the sign is perceived resentfully, as blocking access to or obscuring the material thing, the result is the political, or a grab for power that nonetheless still has to “go through” the sign to get what it wants (the various neo-Nietzschean schemes common to poststructuralism would reduce the sign to this function alone). Finally, when attention oscillates between the closed unity of sign and thing, this creates a sense of distance that allows us to experience the sign-thing relation as beautiful.

The result is a concept of art corresponding in many regards to the definition advanced by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*: the aesthetic is below the threshold of concept (*ohne Begriff*), without interest (*interesselos*), necessary (*notwendig*), and is pleasing (*erzeugt Wohlgefallen*).⁽²⁾ Unlike the original Kantian model, however, this scenario is impervious to the kind of deconstruction practiced by Derrida in his chapter on Kant in *The Truth in Painting* (Derrida 1987, 83-118), which exposes the contradictions arising when Kant tries to separate “pure,” disinterested beauty from the impure, practical concepts that are needed to mediate it. In the case of the ostensive sign, by contrast, all *three* basic modes—the sacral, the political, and the aesthetic—are rooted in the originary relation between sign and thing and are prior to concept; the disinterested aesthetic sign is not any “purer” than the interested approaches to the sign beside it and is not compromised by exposure to concept.⁽³⁾ This trinitarian division of labor is crucial to explaining how performatist art maneuvers through the Scylla of high modernist Kantianism and the Charybdis of postmodern, neo-Nietzschean irony to found a truly new monist mode of representing reality.

There is now a broad consensus among art critics that high modernist, non-representational art fits in well with the basic precepts of Kantianism (as filtered through the writings of formalist critics like Clement Greenberg).⁽⁴⁾ Modernist art operates below the threshold of concept, abjures practicality, strives for a self-referential, formal purity and, if it is good, imposes itself necessarily on the viewer’s intuition. Through this self-referential search for purity, modernist art may be said to strive for a semiotic unity of artist, work, and viewer. This kind of art, which reached its apogee in the Abstract Expressionism of the early 1950’s, was swept away in the 1960’s by what most critics now refer to as postmodern art, or, as the case may be, anti-art. This art is beholden to ironic conceptuality, constantly undercuts the boundaries between art and practice, uses disgusting objects to discredit the notion of essential, thing-bound beauty, and, by virtue of its unrelenting irony, forces the viewer out into a vast contextual expanse from which there is no returning to a pure, unmediated appreciation of the artwork at hand. The philosophical roots of this kind of concept or performance art are Hegelian (its conceptual *Inhaltsästhetik* is directly opposed to Kantian *Formästhetik*) and

Nietzschean, in the sense that the artists are constantly trying to smash through our conceptual illusions by representing them ironically in deliberately flawed or repellant works of anti-art. The semiotics of postmodern art are indisputably dualist: value and meaning accrue to things after the fact, by virtue of their position in a particular context.

This sweeping displacement of a monist sign and value system by a dualist one would seem to confirm the dichotomous notion of art history championed by Heinrich Wölfflin and his followers. Moreover, it suggests that the course of art history might one day be renewed by a direction diametrically opposed to the semiotic dualism, insistent irony, and ludic conceptualism of postmodernism. Unfortunately, although at least some art critics are becoming aware that the “triumph of anti-art” (McEvilley 2005) has turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory, there has been no attempt to conceive of the new, pro-art trend in positive epochal terms. Thus, even when a shrewd critic like Boris Groys is able to conceptualize the new, he is unable or unwilling to link that conceptualization with contemporary artistic practice.⁽⁵⁾ Similarly, a mainstream critic like Arthur C. Danto, who moved from rejection of anti-art to grudging acceptance and appreciation, is now once more edging towards a Kantian position: in a recent series of lectures he concluded that beauty is an anthropological constant and “one of the values that defines what a fully human life means” (Danto 2003, 15). Unfortunately, Danto is still unable to part with a specifically Hegelian approach to art that he links with the analysis of “embodied meaning”⁽⁶⁾—which is to say that art or art appreciation remains in his view a conceptual rather than an intuitive endeavor (in the Kantian sense). My own approach takes exactly the opposite tack. To understand the present epochal shift in art we must, I believe, jettison entirely the notion of concept and return to a specifically intuitive notion of art that is nonetheless distinct from modernist formalism or traditional Kantianism.

The most direct way to explain how this new monism works in art is to recur once more to the notion of the double frame, which consists of two interlocking parts: the primary or inner frame (the ostensive sign) and the outer frame, or work frame. My basic assumption—confirmed by observations in other media—suggests that contemporary artists have intuitively or unconsciously turned to latter-day variants of the ostensive sign to avoid the endless regress and increasingly strained ironies of classic postmodernism, and that they place an outside frame—an ironclad clamp or lock-around that sign to insure that its aesthetic efficacy remains unbroken.

As such, the new epoch may best be defined as the becoming-conscious of the ostensive, which up to now existed as a latent, but unrecognized force in all culture.⁽⁷⁾ The teleological closure resulting therefrom—the notion that the originary semiotic scene has reached its historical fulfillment in the present epoch—is

unavoidable, since it is not possible to think outside history and anticipate what the *next* epoch is going to be without having gone through this one first. In this sense history *always* appears to have ended, since it is not possible to view history from an ahistorical, transcendental perspective.

As noted above, the ostensive sign or inner frame can be experienced in three ways: as sacred, as political, and as aesthetic. The aesthetic is not a separate, pristine realm of its own, but arises when someone takes advantage of a modality offered by the sign in its most basic state. As soon as you step back to regard the sign as it oscillates between being a sign and being a thing, you automatically lose interest in instrumentalizing it for material or sacral ends. For this reason beauty in performatism has no intrinsic formal properties except that of closure; it arises in a reflexive, intuitive distance to the ostensive sign, which is nothing more than a closed mental frame that has been placed around a thing and a signifier. Performatist beauty is not an essence, but is constructed in the intuitively experienced distance to a closed inner frame encompassing an undecidable relation between a sign and a thing.

This postmetaphysical, relational notion of beauty-as-closure is diametrically opposed to the modernist notion that beauty can be achieved by eliminating representation, promoting flatness (Greenberg) or otherwise purging the art work of “extraneous” devices. At the same time, this concept of the aesthetic is no longer postmodern in the sense that it accords the aesthetic a discrete status of its own, rather than treating it merely in terms of a conceptually or ideologically guided, anti-artistic grab for power. In performatism, then, beauty exists necessarily, but it is a “weak,” constructed beauty whose only formal property is that of closure.[\(8\)](#)

The second crucial element of the performatist concept of art is that of the outer frame.[\(9\)](#) The outer frame creates a discrete inner space within a context and—in direct opposition to postmodern practice—forcibly cuts that space off from the surrounding context and from what may variously be described as conceptuality or discourse. The result is a curious expansion of the intuitive minimal space marked by the ostensive sign to some selected part of reality at the expense of discourse and concept—a move that is deeply inexplicable to a postmodernist and deeply pleasing—in the sense of *Wohlgefallen*—to an performatist. In performatist art, the lock between outer and inner frame creates a field of artistically imposed intuition which causes viewers to align themselves with that intuition in a specific way—in a performance. This forcible manipulation of the viewer within the bounds of an intuitively constructed, closed, and categorically organized artificial field is the central device of performatist art.

Inasmuch as the outer frame is forcibly imposed from without, it may be

experienced as the sublime, intimidating product of a higher, powerful will. This distinctly authorial or theist effect stands in direct opposition to the deism of postmodern art, in which the authorial position recedes in an endless mise-en-abyme of undecidable, catch-me-if-you-can irony. In performatist art, the result is what might be called a will to beauty rather than to power, or what I have elsewhere called “Kant with a club” (Eshelman 2005/2006, 2). Although there is no preexisting metaphysical guarantee that beauty or sublimity can be achieved, the entire work is nonetheless “set” towards achieving those effects, and coerces the viewer into receiving them.

Just how do these abstractions translate into concrete works of art? In the following analyses I’ll try to show how double framing works in visual terms, and how certain characteristic themes and devices of performatism are realized in contemporary performance art, painting, and photography. My observations, incidentally, are often in agreement with those made by art critics writing without any theoretical agenda and with the self-assessments of the artists themselves. The crucial problem as I see it is not so much to recognize individual devices as to point out that artists working in completely different media are involved in a larger epochal shift involving not just other artists, but also writers, filmmakers, architects, and philosophers.

Performatist Performance Art: Vanessa Beecroft

Performatism was originally not conceived with art in mind, hence the odd-sounding collocation in the heading above. However, since performance art has become almost entirely synonymous with the anti-art of postmodernism,[\(10\)](#) it seems necessary to point out that there is a performatist performance art, too.

The most striking representative of a no longer postmodern performance artist that I have been able to find is Vanessa Beecroft.[\(11\)](#) Superficially, Beecroft’s performances bear all the trappings of “classic” performance art: they are offensive or merely titillating to many people in the general public, they don’t involve any particular skill in the way they’re set up, and they raise doubts as to whether what she is doing is really “art.”[\(12\)](#) Also, Beecroft’s mildly scandalous public behavior and well-publicized personal problems help round off the image of the performance artist as eccentric exhibitionist (see Thurman 2003), and her performatively enacted themes, which include femininity, voyeurism, and power relations, seem to place her squarely in the mainstream of postmodern discourse.

Beecroft’s performances all follow one basic formula, with occasional exceptions and minor variations. A group comprised of one sex (almost always female[\(13\)](#)) are presented to the public in a closed space to which public access can be tightly

regulated (usually a gallery, a museum, or, more recently, upscale fashion stores). Depending on the plan of the performance, the women range from entirely nude to entirely clothed; Beecroft also employs body paint, wigs, makeup, and the like to alter and unify their appearance. In addition, the performers are given instructions that effectively keep them from performing on their own. Often they are told to stand phalanx-style for about an hour, after which they are free to assume any position they want, as long as they don't move too quickly or interact with the audience. The performers are normally not allowed to speak, so that the performance remains entirely visual. The performances are in addition rather long—about 2-3 hours—and, by all accounts, physically and mentally strenuous for the performers. The artist herself does not participate in any of the performances and is often not even present when they are put on.

Given the well-known details of Beecroft's personal life—she suffers, or suffered, in any case, from an obsession with eating—it is tempting to explain her art as an attempt to work off gender-related pressure exerted by a male-dominated society. In fact, this victimary posture marked Beecroft's very first impromptu performance in Milan in 1993, where spontaneously engaged performers were meant to interact with a diary recording her obsessive eating habits (see Kellein 2004, 123-124). Accordingly, there has been no shortage of attempts to interpret her art as a statement on gender and/or link her with postmodern artists like Cindy Sherman who deliberately scramble conventional markers of masculinity and femininity in order to demonstrate the belatedness and constructedness of gender.

If Beecroft's art demonstrates anything, though, it is not the constructedness of *gender*, but the constructedness of sex. In fact, proceeding from the givens of her performances, it is impossible to draw any direct conclusions about gender whatsoever. This creates problems for poststructuralist and/or feminist interpreters like Christine Ross (2006), who in her extensive treatment of Beecroft speaks of a "preoccupation with homogenized body images and standardized ideals of femininity" (2006, 54) and of the "persistence of a desire to be feminine" (2006, 60). In the logic of late postmodernism, the position of not having an identifiable gender (i.e., being reduced to the female sex) is simply itself another standardized gender role; there is literally nothing prior to gender. It seems hardly necessary to add that the result is a totalizing discourse oblivious to its own exclusion of the human body as a source of originary significance.

In truth, the only thing you can say for sure about Beecroft's nude women is that they're women, and not men or perhaps hermaphrodites, and the only thing you can say about her fully clothed men in U.S. military uniforms is that their gender orientation—whatever it may happen to be—is entirely opaque. What Beecroft's performances do is to drastically cut off the performers (and herself) from whatever

social and sexual roles they might happen to have in real life. The space of the performance is a specifically aesthetic frame constructed around the originary sign of the human body and excluding, as much as possible, the social context that normally affects or “genders” our perception of that body. Of course, this doesn’t mean that the outer frame excludes *everything*, and it doesn’t suggest that the inner frame around the body is constructed in an entirely natural way.

Two examples should suffice to demonstrate this. Although the outer frame or work frame of Beecroft’s performance eliminates most markers of social origin, there are, as a rule, always traces of outside socialization and style—the most notable example being the sailors’ uniforms or various fashion accessories that the performers (who are often professional models) are made to wear. Where they do appear, the outside traces are, however, made uni-form, so that it becomes essentially impossible to “perform” gender heterogeneously in the way that someone like Judith Butler conceives it. Secondly, the body, as the inner frame of Beecroft’s performances, has nothing essentially natural about it. It is an originary construct particular to the performance and *exists as an origin only within the confines of the work frame itself*. Thus, even the presumably natural color of pubic hair is rendered opaque in that performance where Beecroft has the models appear with shaven pudenda and blonde wigs (VB 46). Wigs, paint, hats, and cloth strips (in the *Pontisister* project [\(14\)](#)) all demonstrate the constructedness of the origin or inner frame, even as the outer frame shuts out context and its endlessly shifting ironies that would cause that origin to dissipate in discourse.

Of course, it’s always possible to disregard the discreteness and particularity of the double frame and suggest, as one German art critic did, that a performance of women clad only in pantyhose (VB 55) would have turned out completely differently had it been put on in the gritty Turkish quarter of Berlin rather than in the genteel ambience of the Tiergarten district, where Mies van der Rohe’s New National Gallery is located (Pfütze 2005, 271). This sort of criticism remains, however, entirely external to the performance itself, which is reduced to little more than a device for producing different effects in different contexts (something that, incidentally, applies indiscriminately to *all* works of art—and to everything else, for that matter).

It has also been argued that the real driving force behind Beecroft’s art is her anorexic-bulimic condition and depressive tendencies, which are supposedly played out indirectly by the performers. This focus on pathology, which has been developed systematically by Christine Ross, is, however, not especially compelling. While it is undoubtedly true that the obsessiveness of the artist is forcibly projected onto the performers, and while it is also true that the givens of the performance make them tired and uncomfortable, it is not especially clear why the net result is a discourse of depression. The reason for this curious diagnosis lies in Ross’s

definition of depression as a “dimensional state” (Ross 2006, 68) rather than as a category. Although Ross concedes that Beecroft’s performers “cannot be designated depressed” (2006, 61) and are not “represented in a state of pathological depression” (2006, 61), she nonetheless maintains that they “enact key scientific symptoms of depressive disorders” (2006, 63). In Ross’s typically poststructuralist thinking, “being depressed” is a shifting set of external symptoms rather than a categorical state that you are “in” (baring oneself in public in a group is presumably the last thing a clinically depressed person would want to do). However, being “in” something—the closed work of art—is precisely the situation of Beecroft’s performers.[\(15\)](#) Postmodern criticism of this type is still possible, as these examples show, but it is unable to grasp these performatist performances in positive terms or—what is even more telling—to get inside of them at all.

When you do get inside the performance—and you have to do so to appreciate it fully—you are exposed to a specifically authorial or theist will. This opaque, genderless will confronts viewers with a uniquely constructed originary situation for which there is no *concept*—no norms or previously established rules of conduct.[\(16\)](#) As Dave Hickey notes, “in these tableaux [i.e., in the performances] we are denied both the privacy of contemplating a representation and the intimacy of participating in a real encounter” (Hickey 2000, 7). In effect, the frame of the performance forces both male and female viewers to oscillate between a direct, physical appreciation of the women and the spontaneous search for a socially acceptable attitude within the frame that is not offensive or threatening to others. This intuitive impetus, in conjunction with the particular givens of the performance, creates a specifically aesthetic experience, rather than an erotic or merely social one. In daily life, this sort of thing occurs only when we are confronted with what Erving Goffman calls “breaking frame,” which is to say a massive breach of protocol in conventional, normed situations.[\(17\)](#) In Beecroft’s art, by contrast, the “break” is internalized and becomes an aesthetic paradox: it acts as an autonomous norm forcing us intuitively and spontaneously to work out norms of our own that are binding only in one particular context.[\(18\)](#) This context, in turn, forces pleasure upon us but—not least because of its paradoxical construction—is unable to deliver that pleasure in full. What is at stake here is not the “failure” of this project (which in epistemological terms is a foregone conclusion) but the communal success of the intuitive acts of individuation resulting from it. The participants, in other words, spontaneously form an originary, aesthetically organized community underneath the threshold of concept, and the performers achieve a kind of minimal individuation in spite of—or perhaps precisely because of—their isolation from discourse.

Beecroft’s intuitive, categorically organized experience is not a belated effect of discourse or a set of pathological symptoms created under laboratory conditions, as Ross would have it. Rather, it is the direct Other of discursive experience and its

immediate, implacable rival. This lack of discursivity has not been lost on postmodern artists like Vaginal Davis, who has put on queer burlesque send-ups of Beecroft's performances that supply the "missing" dimension of gender as well as stage a pornographic return to the real (for a lengthier discussion of this see Doyle 2006, 121-140). However, these supplements remain entirely external to Beecroft's performances and only serve to underscore their position beneath the threshold of postmodern discourse.

The results of Beecroft's performances are, as noted above, aesthetically ambivalent. Although there is a distinct, almost classical will to beauty in force (the focus on the nude body), the interplay and oscillation between personal pleasure and spontaneously constructed role-playing vis-à-vis others keeps a "pure," classically Kantian apprehension of beauty from arising (the kind of intuitive appreciation that Greenberg was looking for when assessing abstract painting). The aesthetic, in other words, is confirmed in Gans's sense as an originary anthropological construct and not as an ineffable a priori essence. This constructedness is, incidentally, also apparent in the categorical set-up of many of Beecroft's performances: hair color (sometimes augmented by brightly colored wigs) and various ornaments are used to create simple, usually color-coded categories within the performances. The result is a kind of primitive Kantianism—one might call it Kant with a fright wig—that imposes half-natural, half-artificial aesthetic categories on viewers' intuition.

It might be added, however, that there are certain crucial differences between Beecroft's constructs and Kant's original concept of the aesthetic. In Kantian thought the categories (quantity, quality, relation, modality) form a bridge between intuitive empirical experience (which is pre-conceptual) and the understanding (which is conceptual); the categories are simply "there" a priori and are not subjected to any further critique within Kant's own system (cf. § 9 and 10 in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A 70 / B95 ff.). In Beecroft and the other artists I will be discussing, the categories seem to emerge spontaneously out of the intuitively experienced material, which, however, has been organized beforehand by a theist artist whose motives are always personal and hence subject to some kind of further critique. This theist manipulation is foreign to Kant, whose thinking is explicitly deist (see in particular A 675/ B703 in *The Critique of Pure Reason*).

Finally, Beecroft may be said to incorporate both the ostensive and imperative mode in Gans's sense into her art.[\(19\)](#) This, I think, is the best way of explaining her interest not just in scantily clad women, but also in uniformed, rigidly posed sailors. As she herself notes of her performances with sailors, "I wanted to see how . . . military rules of conduct rub off on aesthetics" (Kellein 2004, 129). The sailors, no less than the women, appear here beneath the threshold of concept: in the closed

space of the museum they impose an imperative order on spectators, albeit in an autonomous, non-practical way that visitors would otherwise not be able to experience. The perhaps legitimate objection that Beecroft is avoiding an ideological critique of the military by limiting herself to a specifically aesthetic venue is, however, based in its most extreme form on a notion of art that regards any autonomous and intuitive personal experience (be it of order or of anything else) as a sham to begin with. It is, however, precisely within this imposed free space of autonomous selfhood that the aesthetic moment resides, and it seems that after many years of being effaced and dissipated in postmodernism it is making a comeback of epochal dimensions.

Performatist Photography: Andreas Gursky's Aesthetic Theism

It is no understatement to describe the changes that have occurred in art photography over the last 15 years as dramatic. Like the anti-art of postmodernism, photography of the 1970's and 80's delighted in freakish, unattractive themes and a seemingly amateurish *mise en scène* of its material. The striking, disturbing images of Lee Friedlander, Annie Leibowitz, Nan Goldin, and Diane Arbus, to name just a few, may be taken as tokens of this general tendency. In Germany, postmodern photography found an original incarnation in the influential work of Hilla and Bernd Becher.⁽²⁰⁾ The Bechers specialized in pictures of peripheral, unattractive industrial objects like water towers, winding towers of coal mines, or grain silos, all of which were photographed in the same, deadpan way from the same position against flat gray skies. Taken alone, the pictures don't beautify the formal elements of their quotidian subject matter (the way Edward Weston squeezed formal beauty out of curvaceous bell peppers). Taken together, though, they form a discourse documenting the fascinating endless differences in the visual language of functional architecture. Given the heritage of German photography, it was also evident that the Bechers were doing for industrial capitalism what August Sander once did for people with his *Stammmappen*⁽²¹⁾; they were creating a kind of systematic register documenting individual types. The pictures also acquired an added poignancy because many of these industrial objects were falling into disuse or being torn down; the pictures came to document the slow decline of an entire industrial region. The photographer was in any case no longer a creative individual taking artsy pictures of odd or perhaps even beautiful objects, but a kind of performance-artist-with-a-lens organizing and presenting us a deliberately drab visual discourse with socially critical implications.⁽²²⁾

This discursive, anti-aesthetic approach was given a more explicit ideological spin by Thomas Struth, a pupil of the Bechers, who in his *Unconscious Places* (1987) photographed cities in the early morning to look as if they were entirely unlivable, if not to say unlivable. It is no accident that the vanishing lines in some of his bleak

urban scenes lead towards distant, diminutive church spires, which seem unable to compensate in iconic terms for the desolation that the receding perspective is coldly thrusting toward them. The dour irony of this and similar projects by Becher pupils(23) made one of the richest countries in the world appear economically stagnant and spiritually barren. The point is not, of course, whether this pictorial analysis was true in strict empirical terms. It did, however, reflect a widespread disaffection among intellectuals with what was perceived as a repressive state and a self-satisfied, morally indifferent postwar society.

All this began to change sometime in the mid-to-late 1990's. In hindsight it seems obvious that two separate developments worked together. First, postmodernist anti-art was beginning to exhaust what seemed like an unlimited plurality of possibilities for sawing off the branch upon which it was sitting. Although there was no dearth of concepts to subvert, the ironic gesture involved in doing so was becoming increasingly predictable and easy to duplicate. While conceptual art didn't simply disappear overnight, there has been a noticeable tendency—particularly in Germany—towards the “classic” medium of painting and away from jumbled installations and crudely provocative performance art. Secondly, the rapid, revolutionary switch to a market economy in Eastern European countries and the globalization process in general made capitalism—whatever one happened to think of it in political terms—into a universal, inescapable economic and cultural reality.(24)

The results of both these developments converge in the photography of the West German Andreas Gursky (b. 1955). Gursky, who was originally a student of the Bechers, began by making photos aimed at humdrum subjects and steeped in the dualist irony of postmodernism. His *Bochum, University (Bochum, Uni)* 1988, reproduced in Gursky 1995), for example, shows a university terrace with a massive, honeycombed, poured-concrete roof that blocks off our view of the sky. A few students stand scattered beneath the roof engrossed in reading or conversation, with a natural panorama of fields and forest faintly visible in the background haze. Another work from this period, *Ratingen* (1984, in Gursky 1995), shows a park forest road marked with two parallel red-and-white circular traffic signs signaling “no entry” to vehicles; a few visitors stand scattered around the entry path to the forest, perhaps preparing to leave or preparing to enter. The “message” in both cases is hard to miss. In *Ratingen*, the arbitrary, doubled cultural sign (a simulacrum of itself) acts as a barrier to a nature that acquires its “natural,” privileged position precisely by virtue of the sign; the photograph confronts us visually with the undecidable duality that lies at the core of all postmodernist thought. In *Bochum University*, the roof protects us—perhaps overly so—from nature while at the same time interdicting our access to the transcendent openness of the sky.(25) Humans are indeed present in both cases, but they seem randomly

positioned and pursue no particular goals. Nature, for its part, appears as a hazy promise in the background—so to speak under erasure, both there and not there. When taken together, Gursky's two photographs cut us off vertically from transcendent experience and horizontally from a natural one: the photographs thrust us back into the condition of endless, undecidable immanence that is postmodernism.

Other early Gursky photos, however, project an openness and a hint of transcendent experience lacking in those of his postmodern contemporaries. The most notable example is his 1989 color photograph of a Ruhr Valley bridge (*Ruhrtal*), which may be said to mark symbolically the gateway out of postmodernism and into performatism. The photo shows a tiny human figure beneath a tall highway bridge that forms a dark diagonal band running across the top of the picture from left to right. The miniscule figure is framed by the two tall, slender pillars of the bridge and the grass embankment on which he is standing; in the background there is a flat gray Becher-like sky. The dynamic, diagonally inclined bridge, though, is more than just another inert industrial object waiting to be visually archived; the open expanse of flat gray sky (which takes up most of the picture) is more than just a neutral backdrop, and the human figure—evidently a fisherman—seems to be caught in a state of open potentiality rather than one of ironic undecidability. [\(26\)](#) *Ruhrtal* doesn't contain any of Gursky's later trademark techniques or motifs—the eagle-eye perspective, the digital manipulation, or the brightly colored matrices of things, buildings, and people. However, the picture's evident lack of critical irony and its optimistic opening up of space foreshadow the direction his no-longer postmodern aesthetic would take in the future.

In the more recent analyses and appreciations of Gursky's work there is a broadly held feeling that Gursky is something other than postmodern (and certainly no longer compatible with the aesthetic championed by the Bechers). However, this feeling is seldom expressed in a resolute way, and is invariably couched in terms applying well to Gursky's art but not to anyone else's. In the following remarks I would like to set forth a thumbnail sketch of Gursky's art that will allow us to place him not in some sort of differentially defined individual niche after postmodernism, but in the broad context of the epochal shift that is performatism.

My starting point is the double frame, which is to say the lock between a theist, authorial perspective and a personal, human one. Gursky's pictures are normally taken from "on high" and because of this create the effect of sublime distance to their objects. Gursky himself speaks of an "extra-planetary" perspective (as quoted in Pfab 1998, no pagination) and notes that he is interested in humans as a "species" in their environment and not as individuals (Gursky 1988, IX). This theist perspective, which overwhelms the senses more than it pleases them, keeps his

pictures from descending into the uncritical celebration practiced by commercial photography. The first immediate effect of his photography is thus to totalize the things or activities we see within a large, but highly selective frame. This sublime totalization, however, can only function as a whole because it is confirmed by categorical order existing at a lower, human level. Gursky himself puts it like this:

You never notice arbitrary details in my work. On a formal level, countless interrelated micro and macrostructures are woven together, determined by an overall organisational principle. A closed microcosm which, thanks to my distanced attitude towards my subject, allows the viewer to recognise the hinges that hold the system together. (Gursky 1988, VIII) Due to the high resolution of the pictures (and also to digital manipulation) this sublime, theist perspective is anchored in sharply defined, digitally manipulated images that practically force us as viewers to focus on small individual things and their formal, ordered relationships—in short, to experience beauty. [\(27\)](#) The eagle's-eye view, in conjunction with high resolution, an often unnaturally deep field of focus, and brightly colored, enigmatically ordered forms encourages us to work out intuitive categories of order which, when synthesized in our mind's eye, confirm the original totality confronting us in the first place. Here, too, the effect is Kantian in the special performatist sense I have been using all along. As Gursky says, "the history of art seems to possess a generally valid formal vocabulary which we use again and again" (Gursky 1998). One must add, however, this formal vocabulary is not entirely "natural" or a priori but is imposed on the viewer through a totalizing, highly selective gaze and through digital manipulation. In this pixelated Kantianism, nature and art are framed by a theist artist in such a way as to be indistinguishable—and we wind up believing in this unity whether we want to or not.

This unity can also be seen in Gursky's photo of a landfill (*Ohne Titel XIII*, 2002) and of one of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings (*Ohne Titel VI*, 1997), which are simply different versions of the same thing caught in different stages of constructedness. The drips are a kind of garbage that Pollock deliberately placed on canvas to form random but beautiful patterns; the garbage in the landfill forms beautiful patterns partly by chance, partly through digital manipulation by Gursky. As in all performatist art, these larger frames or totalized unities are nothing more than giant-size versions of the original ostensive sign, which is that place where nature (the thing) and culture (the sign) are intuitively framed for the first time through spontaneous, mutual agreement and form a communal, divinely charged field deferring conflict. Gursky's specific feat is to position himself on the outside of the frame, as it were, as a quasi-divine being with a totalizing perspective that at the same time allows individual access to categorically mediated, beautiful thingness. The price of this aesthetic theism is, however, that we are never absolutely sure what is real and what has been digitally manipulated—and usually have no way of

knowing if the artist doesn't tell us. The net result, as in all performatism, is to create an artificially framed aesthetic field that we *believe in* even though we are aware of the artificial, manipulative conditions behind it.

This aesthetic theism also causes Gursky's photographs to radiate a metaphysical optimism that is entirely alien to postmodernism. This is most evident in the way Gursky presents space. In the postmodern photographs of Ruff and Struth, space—even outside, presumably open space—is presented as claustrophobic (typical examples are Ruff's *Haus Nr. 8 III* [\(28\)](#) or Struth's *Shinju-ku* [Skyscrapers], reproduced in Struth 2002, 35). In Gursky's art, the opposite is true. Even when Gursky in *Copan* (2002) photographs essentially the same thing as Struth does in *Shinju-ku* (the massive facades of ugly high-rise buildings), the variegated colors and ordered patterns in Gursky's facades work to dematerialize their oppressive volume. [\(29\)](#) In Gursky's work, in fact, even the most closed and oppressive inner space imaginable—that of a jail in *Stateville, Illinois* (2002)—appears radiant and open; light shines through the outside windows of each cell into the inner courtyard, from whose center the picture was taken. In Foucauldian terms, this panoptic perspective would at first seem to make the photographer (and ourselves) complicit in the prison's confining, punitive function. This centering, however, can be interpreted in quite another way: it allows us to apprehend the possibility of universal redemption for the inhabitants of the cells, who appear framed by miniscule cubes of light. The principle of spatial transcendence realized in the earlier *Ruhrtal* (the tiny figure surrounded by a large open frame) is now repeated a hundredfold in more constricted circumstances—but with an optimistic refraction of light suggesting the possibility of individual transcendence.

The inevitable question arises as to whether Gursky would not do better subjecting globalization to an ironic pictorial critique of the sort developed by Ruff, Struth, and others and also employed by Gursky in some of his early work. These ironic techniques, as noted above, include strategies of exposing the conceptual dualities conditioning our "natural" vision and of "returning to the real"—photographing depopulated, constricted space so as to suggest oppression and spiritual emptiness. Although it is no doubt possible to employ these and similar techniques in a critique of global capitalism, it would prevent us from ever capturing globalization pictorially in its own terms, as a total phenomenon. If global capitalism really is as spiritually empty, ugly, arbitrary, and claustrophobic as the postmodern critique maintains, then it is fair to ask how it managed to unfold such a world-encompassing, universal dynamic in the first place. This question, I believe, finds a more convincing answer in Gursky's method than in Ruff's or Struth's. For in Gursky's photography we experience the totalizing, dynamic, overwhelming effect peculiar to globalization itself. While not "critical" in the postmodern sense that requires us to take the position of a peripheral victim, Gursky's work forces us to experience a distinct sort

of ambivalence regarding the activities or things portrayed. Because totalization *imposes* beauty and order on us, and because we remain aware of this circumstance in spite of our enjoying its details, we are also encouraged to develop an intuitive resistance towards it. This resistance operates not through concept, but through the apprehension of categorical equivalencies arising between different totalities. Taken together, the pictures of the Kuwaiti stock exchange, the North Korean mass assemblies, and Vietnamese basket-weaving factory (and, of course, all of Gursky's other photos relating to global society) form a categorical assemblage of totalities whose imagery could be reapplied in a potentially critical, discursive way to the reality around us. The fact that Gursky doesn't express this criticism himself in words is less his problem than our own. The point is, however, that an effective critique of globalization must first apprehend the dynamics of globalization itself in order to counter that dynamic in an effective way. In this regard the type of art pioneered by Gursky may indeed play an instrumental role in future critiques of globalization that move beyond the neo-Nietzschean, localized positions typical of postmodernism and prescribed by poststructuralism.

Thomas Demand: Bracketing the Real

Perhaps the most unusual and inimitable performatist photographer of today is the German Thomas Demand, who was originally trained as a sculptor. Demand first painstakingly recreates scenes (usually interiors) out of folded paper and cardboard on a 1-to-1 scale, then photographs them with a large-format camera or films them (the model is destroyed after the picture is taken). The large-scale pictures are in turn displayed without frames in laminated Plexiglass on patterned backgrounds, giving the impression of being direct incisions in the wall.

From the performatist point of view, Demand's technique may be said to radically reduce photography to an experience of theist willpower and originary, categorical intuition. This claim may at first seem curious because Demand draws heavily on familiar media images relating to juicy, discourse-laden subjects like brutal crimes, corrupt politics, and dramatic historical events—typical examples being his *Tunnel* (a film moving through a life-size facsimile of the tunnel in which Lady Diana died); *Corridor* (depicting the hallway where the mass murderer Jeffrey Dahmer lived); or *Office* (showing a looted office of the Stasi, the East German state security service). Indeed, the standard postmodern way of describing Demand's pictures is in terms of the absent things that they purport to represent: they are said, for example, to “capture moments that refer to a greater event, a before and after.” (Gaensheimer 2004, 70). Seen from this epistemological perspective, the visually stunning, large-format pictures are mainly there to make us conscious of a lack: “Demand's *Bathroom* [a picture relating to a notorious German political scandal] points to the evasions and ultimately to the failure of photography's attempts to understand the

violence behind the apparent ambiguity of political life” (Marcoci 2005, no pagination).

However, upon examining these photographs more closely—it would perhaps be better to say intuitively—it becomes apparent that we can derive them from media images only through descriptions of their titles, which function in much the same way that the *inscriptio* and *subscriptio* did in Baroque emblems: they ascribe meaning to what is otherwise an inexplicably constructed, rather arbitrary looking scene. If you didn’t have the *subscriptio* provided by Demand in his interviews, Lady Di’s tunnel could be anyone’s tunnel, Jeffrey Dahmer’s corridor anyone’s corridor, and the looted Stasi office anyone’s act of vandalism anywhere. Demand’s constructive technique evidently disturbs the causal connection leading from reality to the photograph so much that it must be artificially supplemented with outside discourse (even the generic titles, which in conventional terms are indisputably part of the photograph’s presentation, don’t help much in figuring out what his pictures are about).[\(30\)](#) The inevitable poststructuralist objection—that Demand’s supplementary outside explanations are as much a part of the photograph as its supposedly discrete inner space—makes sense in epistemological, but not in performative terms. Why spend months painstakingly constructing and photographing a “traceless” scene in order to expose your own creation as a failure with a few short remarks? Here as elsewhere, the point is not that Demand is “reinscribing” already existing discursive reality; he’s creating a new reality of his own and reprojecting it categorically onto the consciousness of his viewers.

Demand’s photographs, in short, create discrete aesthetic spaces accessible primarily, if not exclusively, to intuition; like Beecroft’s performances, they are far enough below the threshold of concept that they must be reconnected to the practical world around them artificially. If anything, the photographs act as indices not of reality, but of categorical experience: the tunnel is a scene prefiguring *all* threats emanating from tunnels, the corridor is *any* lonely person’s corridor, the looted office *any* retributive act of destruction. Demand isn’t providing us with failed representations forcing their failure upon us after the fact; instead, he’s supplying us with a set of ostensive aesthetic *categories* that can be used by us a priori to construct or approach quotidian reality anew. This *category art* is, in effect, the opposite of, and successor to, the concept art that has dominated our aesthetic experience for the last thirty years or so.

My assessment of Demand’s art as a positive act of creation is not alone. As Michael Fried has pointed out in an important recent article in *Artforum*, Demand’s photographs aren’t about lack or failure; they’re about imposing the intention of the artist on the spectator. As Fried writes, Demand tries

to replace the original scene of evidentiary traces and marks of human use—the historical world in all its layeredness and compositeness—with images of sheer authorial intention, as through the very bizarreness of the fact that the scenes and objects in the photographs, despite their initial appearance of quotidian “reality,” have all been constructed by the artist throws into conceptual relief the determining force (also the inscrutability, one might say the opacity) of the intention behind it. (Fried 2005, 202) Translated into the epochal terminology of performatism, you could say that the theist artist Demand occludes discourse on the level of the sign-object or inner frame by depriving it of all but the most minimal features necessary to make it identifiable as a real-world object. For the viewer, the only adequate way of approaching these constructed minimal objects is, nolens volens, through intuition.

This intuition, however, is not indeterminate or up to the individual position taken by the viewer, as is the case in what Fried calls minimalism or literalism. Instead, Demand’s inner frames are imposed on viewers through the opaque will of the theist artist; the viewer experiences the whole of the work as an uneasy mixture of beauty, uncanniness, sublimity, and discursivity (which is tacked on, as it were, as an afterthought by the imperfectly theist artist confirming the existence of a world outside his own creative scene [\(31\)](#)). This “ontological project” as Fried (2005, 202) calls it, radically reverses the entire program of postmodernism. We are no longer dealing with an anti-image demonstrating the failure of the visual sign to represent reality, but with a unique, originary construct that relocates the apprehension of reality in a “divine” aesthetic act uniting creator, object, and viewer. And, if we inject the notion of category into Fried’s analysis, the will of the artist can be integrated intuitively into the consciousness of the viewer and projected back out again onto the real world. My only real complaint about Fried’s analysis is that he doesn’t go far enough: he explicitly leaves the question of an epochal shift open. This is a gap that can easily be filled, however, by reference to a theory of performatism.

Performatist Painting

Arthur C. Danto’s *After the End of Art* (1995) ends with a discussion of the end of original style in postmodern painting. In his remarks on the American Russel Connor and on the Russian emigré duo Komar and Melamid, Danto notes that the task of the artist is no longer to paint in any new style (since everything has presumably already been tried out) but to ironically juxtapose already known, mutually exclusive codes. The result is a comic art practiced by what might best be described as highly gifted pranksters; in the case of Komar and Melamid, for example, the performance surrounding the work of art (“America’s Most Wanted” [\(32\)](#)) is more important than the work itself. Faced with the imminent dissolution of art into what

looks like a running series of practical jokes, Danto retreats to an essentialist, above-the-fray Hegelian position affirming the continued existence of art in different historical settings. Art, which is always “about something” and always “embodies meaning” (1995, 195) no matter how mundane or trivial its subject matter may be, can do so in completely different ways under completely different historical conditions, in accordance with the prevailing zeitgeist. Although Danto several times invokes the name of Heinrich Wölfflin—the scholar virtually synonymous with an epochal concept of art history—he understandably makes no attempt to speculate on how and when the end of art could actually end. Art in 2005 will no doubt be completely different from what we imagine it today, he continues, but the main thing is that it will still be identifiable as art (1995, 199).

Some 12 years later, the situation in art has indeed changed in a way that would hardly have been imaginable in 1995. There has been a massive resurgence of paintings that are no longer comic, ironic, or composed entirely of self-conscious citations of other styles. The most talked-about younger artists are painters or photographers rather than performance artists, and the art they have been producing has a feel to it that is not readily captured using the terminology of postmodernism. This development has, of course, not been lost on art critics, who have begun to use heretofore suspect words like “ontology,” “immediacy,” “beauty,” or “totality” to describe the new works in a positive way. Obviously, I have no quarrel with these assessments. However, I would insist that the changes they describe must be treated as epochal in nature, and not simply as incremental innovations or yet another new proof of postmodernism’s sheer endless mutability.

This epochal perspective is Hegelian in the sense that it assumes that art can be said to progress in diametrically opposed leaps and bounds, and that certain types of art can appear only in certain times or epochs. It is, however, non-Hegelian in the sense that the motor of this progress is located in a basic, insoluble conflict between semiotic monism and semiotic dualism and not in the zeitgeist, in shifts in concept or style, or in a particular mode of argumentation “accidentally” always favoring one side of the equation. In this regard there can be no end of history in the Hegelian and/or postmodern sense. The seeming “triumph” of one semiotic mode over the other invariably causes its methods to congeal into conventional norms that in time would choke off the free space that makes art what it is. The only way out of this trap is to break with normative convention as it stands and adopt the position of its semiotic Other. The problem we are facing today is that art has intuitively taken this step some time ago but art criticism has not. It is still caught up in a discourse that can only conceive of art in terms of differential shifts within the Same, but not in terms of a leap towards an intuitively experienced unity of artist, work, and observer that transpires on the level of the sign and not on the level of concept. The case of Danto shows that even a moderate Hegelian with a

soft spot for Kant isn't going to get us out of this posthistorical bind. For to do so, we are all going to have to in some way become neo-neo-Kantians and semiotic monists—at least until that posture, too, exhausts its creative and analytical possibilities.

Closed and Open Horizons: Bulatov, Gursky, and Eitel

The most direct way to describe the shift to monism in painting (and in painterly photography) is to show how a certain conceptualist motif is cut off from concept and forced to float in the intuitively perceived and categorically defined free space of the performatist frame.

My starting point is the work of Erik Bulatov, one of the most important Russian conceptualist painters of the 70's and 80's. Like the other conceptualists, Bulatov used techniques comparable to those of Western pop-art, but with a uniquely Soviet point of reference. His perhaps most well-known painting, *Horizon* (*Gorizont*, 1971-72), seems at first to be done entirely in the pseudo-naturalist style of Socialist Realism: it depicts a group of fully clothed people on a beach walking away from the viewer towards the ocean horizon on a bright sunny day. A closer look reveals that the canvas is divided into four horizontal stripes of kitschy, highly saturated color: the yellow sand of the beach, the dark blue of the water, an abstract, broad red band where the horizon should normally be, and the cerulean blue of the sky. For those familiar with Soviet symbols, the red band blocking the horizon is not just an abstraction, but is also the ribbon attached to the Order of Lenin, one of the highest honors bestowed in the Soviet Union. As Groys has pointed out in his *Total Art of Stalinism* (1992), Bulatov is echoing a theme of Nietzsche's (who likens the death of God to wiping out the horizon) as well as staging an undecidable struggle between Socialist Realism, modernism, and official Soviet power: in competing for power with Socialist Realism, modernist abstraction itself becomes indistinguishable from an official insignia of power.[\(33\)](#) The painting, in effect, exposes previous art movements as a will to power and power as a will to art. Using a by now familiar ploy of postmodern conceptualism, the artist occupies a liminal, shifting position that is parasitic on the discourses he is using without being reducible to any one of them.

Groys would, however, come to realize in his later essay *Unter Verdacht* [*Under Suspicion*, 2000] that the uncanny elusiveness and unaccountability of the postmodern artist eventually works to revive the notion of subjectivity itself. Since the artist has the unique power to renew value in the cultural archive, he or she inevitably comes to be regarded as the bearer of some sort of transcendent secret, even if—or precisely because—the artist's main message is that there *is* no secret.[\(34\)](#) The result is what Groys calls a "submedial subject," who operates with

consistent success below the level of concept and who, because of that, attracts our envy and suspicion.

Because Groys remains rooted in postmodern skepticism, he is unwilling to assign the submedial subject anything more the role of a Loki—a deceitful, vaguely malevolent prankster-god. This is, once more, entirely in keeping with a specifically Nietzschean interpretation of the sign, which sees in it only the political and sacral:

Subjectivity is always only the subjectivity of the other, who is assumed to be behind its surface. Subjectivity is what appears to me suspicious about someone else, what scares me—it is what causes me to make lamentations and accusations, to assign responsibility, to struggle and protest—in short, to engage in politics. Only when a hidden God is assumed to be behind the image of the world does one feel moved to take a political stance. (Groys 2000, 30) What Groys is unable to grasp is that the autonomous or submedial space inhabited by art may also create an affirmative, constructive projection of its own that can be imposed visually on others on its own terms.⁽³⁵⁾ In recent art, in fact, it's possible to observe how painters working in the new monism have done just that. These artists use strategies that dampen or defuse suspicion and create positive visual projections within the artificially imposed, but internally free space of intuition.

These strategies are, first of all, evident in the “painterly” photos of Andreas Gursky already treated above. It is particularly interesting in this regard to see what Gursky does with the horizon motif used by Bulatov. This motif is, of course, not original to Bulatov himself. It directly cites Socialist Realist models like Aleksandr Dejneka's *Future Pilots (Budushchie lyotchiki, 1937)* and indirectly the work of the German Romantic Caspar David Friedrich, who likes to place observers with their backs turned to us in front of radiant, horizontally organized seascapes or landscapes. In Friedrich's typically Romantic projection, we are not only confronted by a sublime, numinous Nature, but we are also made to reflect on how others reflect on that Nature.

Gursky cites Friedrich's landscapes in several photographs,⁽³⁶⁾ but the one most relevant for this discussion would seem to be *Rhein II* (Rhine II, 1999). *Rhein II* confronts us with a landscape that is no less spiritualized than Friedrich's and no less artificial than Bulatov's. The large-format photograph, which measures approximately 6 x 12 ft (208 x 387 cm), consists of seven horizontal stripes: a verdant shore at the bottom, a gray ribbon of road, more green shore, a gleaming, mercury-like band of wave-rippled water, a gray strip of shore, the green stripe of the far riverbank, and a flat, grayish-white sky above it. As in Bulatov's painting, we have difficulty deciding whether the photo is entirely natural, though for different reasons. The neatly horizontal bands of land, water, and sky appear so perfectly

composed as to be unreal, and critics have in fact associated the photograph with works by abstract artists like Barnett Newman and Agnes Martin (see, for example, Lütgens 1988, XVI). In Gursky's case, however, the effect is not one of ironic undecidability but of a paradoxical unity prior to all concept; the viewer has little choice but to oscillate between these two potentialities imposed on them by the frame of the photo. The two undecidably fused poles of the natural and the artificial are in turn augmented and intensified by the other factors noted earlier: the sublime size of the picture; the set towards form and order; the imposition of categorical intuition on the viewer; and the possibility of transcending the frame of the individual picture and reapplying its givens to other works of art or to nature itself.

Unlike the work of Friedrich and Bulatov, there is no reflection on reflection in Gursky's picture: nature, art, and the observer are all bound together in a framed unity that seems to transcend, rather than undercut, the individual premises upon which that unity is based. And, even if we are aware that Gursky manipulated this scene⁽³⁷⁾ (he digitally excised a factory that would probably have warmed the hearts of the Bechers), the effect of this epistemological insight on our appreciation of the photograph is nil. Like gender in Beecroft's nude performances and media events in Demand's architectonic photos, the building has simply been bracketed out of existence; it leaves no traces for us to interpret. We know it is out there somewhere, but have no way of connecting it to the photograph without the explicit intervention of the theist artist, who "positions" us along a particular phenomenological axis that in turn forces us to perceive the world anew. The "suspicious" Groysonian viewer must either reject the painterly photo's sublimity and beauty out of hand or try vainly to imagine something that isn't there—the factory that would effectively reinscribe the picture in "the real," and ultimately in a particular, identifiable context. Suspicion without concept is, however, nothing more than *belief*, and it is precisely that effect that the picture achieves: it converts skeptics into believers whether they like it or not.

Another variant of the horizon/observer motif can be found in the work of Tim Eitel (b. 1971), a German artist associated with the New Leipzig School. I am not sure whether Eitel is familiar with Bulatov, but many of his paintings appear to cite Friedrich's romantic scenes: naturalistically depicted people with their backs turned towards us walk casually towards or stand in front of the horizon of a beach or field.⁽³⁸⁾ The effect achieved by Eitel lies somewhere between painting and snapshot photography, without, however, suggesting photorealism. Because Eitel uses very flat, rich expanses of monochrome paint in his depictions of nature, his pictures take on an abstract quality in spite of their patent realism. The major difference to Bulatov is that the coexistence of the natural and the abstract lacks any ironic tension whatsoever. Nature appears as an abstraction of the theist artist

(who “improves” nature by making it more monochrome, saturated in color, and homogenous than it really is). At the same time, the monochrome abstraction is never allowed to dominate entirely: there is always just enough detail to keep it within the bounds of the mimetic.

This applies with no less intensity to the humans caught up in this aesthetically simplified and beautified space. Their own emotional state of mind remains enigmatic and opaque, either because they are turned away from us completely or because when they face us they seem entirely oblivious to the artist-observer.[\(39\)](#) Although not represented in photorealistic detail, the subjects always still evince slight traces of individual taste or character: a particular slouch, a certain kind of handbag, a sport jacket slung over the arm in a characteristic way. In this sense these figures are not stereotypes (as in Bulatov) or mere conduits of Romantic reflection on the sublime (as in Friedrich). Against the mimetic flatness of the surroundings they stand out as uniquely, albeit minimally, human. Eitel’s paintings of this sort in fact radiate an enticing, irresistible combination of the theist and the human. The observer is lured into their space by the theistically perfected depiction of nature and by the enigmatic opacity or closedness of the people within that nature—whereupon the aesthetic trap snaps shut: you yourself enter into the intuitive space of the painting whether you like it or not.

This theistically constructed unity of abstraction and realism is even more pointed in Eitel’s museum paintings, in which the naturalistic level of the observers seems to overlap with the abstract level of the paintings they are looking at. In *Blue and Yellow* (*Blau und Gelb*, 2002), as in Bulatov’s *Horizon*, an abstract stripe (of a black museum railing in the picture’s foreground) runs across the breadth of the canvas and appears at first glance to be on the same plane as the Mondrian painting behind it. However, the disruptive illusion disappears quickly when one notices that a human observer is standing between the artificial monochrome lines of the painting and the real, monochrome line of the railing. In Gans’s generative anthropology the human is defined precisely as the ability to distinguish between the real as mediated by the sign and the sign itself; in *Blue and Yellow* it is a human subject that allows us to make precisely this distinction in regard to a pictorial representation. Eitel’s museum paintings may thus best be described as performative, second-degree representations of the originary, paradoxical aesthetic situation. They create a visual outer frame that forces the observer to participate in the peculiarly human oscillation between signs and thingness that is represented in the inner frame of the painting; what is represented in the inner frame by the artist is performed by the viewer in the outer one. Painter, viewer, and painting all converge within the bounds of one closed frame.

A die-hard postmodernist would no doubt object that Eitel’s human figures are

trapped helplessly between the representation of the real and the representation of the abstract. However, this sort of “suspicious” interpretation must pointedly ignore the placidly opaque demeanor of the subjects involved. Although in a certain sense they really *are* trapped in the aesthetic space between the real and the sign, they seem neither to enjoy nor to suffer from their predicament: they are suspended, as it were, in an ostensive, originary mode of complete potentiality and don’t appear to suffer unduly because of it.[\(40\)](#) The only way to “get behind” their opacity and “get back” to discourse would be to excise the human from the paintings entirely—a move that would, however, be external to the works themselves and that would, in essence, destroy them.

The Aesthetic Workshop of Neo Rauch

One of the main conceits of Russian conceptualism was that capitalism and socialism were essentially the same—both were equally unfree, but capitalism was simply materially better off, and hence less cognizant of its own illusions. As Bulatov himself recently put it, “In the West there is no freedom either, just its semblance. There’s no difference between Soviet and Western unfreedom. Genuine freedom is a rupture [*proryv*] running through social reality” (Bulatov 2006, 54). In this way of thinking (which is of course not all that much different from Western conceptualism) only the neo-Nietzschean artist has the power to subvert the illusions of both systems by enacting the kind of ironic conundrums described above, which force us to assume a position of otherness vis-à-vis prevailing codes and experience a liminal, tenuous kind of freedom within the cracks opening up in the dominant culture. The fall of communism, however, wasn’t just another reshuffling of already familiar concepts. The socio-economic system called capitalism became a universal reality, whereas its chief rival, communism, entered into the realm of the unreal—it simply ceased to exist as a physical entity.

The disappearance of their brand of conceptual “unfreedom” into an ontological black hole provoked different reactions among artists from the former Soviet bloc. While it’s not possible here to go into all individual variants, one can speak of three general tendencies. The first might be called art-or business-as usual. Bulatov, for example, continued to work in a similar fashion as before, for example, by placing diagonally receding three-dimensional slogans in front of natural backgrounds (a citation of a Russian avant-garde technique that is lost on most Westerners; see his *Freedom is Freedom I* [2000], depicted in Bulatov 2006, 52). As the critic Vladimir Tupitsyn (2007) has pointed out, these new paintings lack the ironic bite of Bulatov’s Soviet work; they appear more like flashy advertising images than the neo-Nietzschean commentary on capitalism they are no doubt intended to be.[\(41\)](#) Others, like Komar and Melamid, who emigrated earlier, had less problems adapting and, as noted above, became adept at turning Western marketing techniques into

both tools and targets of their conceptual irony.

A second tendency is what Hal Foster (1996) has called “return to the real,” and which is often thought to be typical of postmodern art in the 1990’s. In the Russian context, this applies to anti-artists like Alexander Brener, Oleg Kulik, and the photographer Boris Mikhailovich. These artists seem at first glance to take the materiality of the art work *literally*; they destroy other people’s art works (Kulik), physically attack observers during performances (Brener), or present the real as abject and debased (Mikhailovich). This kind of art rubs our noses in the material existence of the real while conceptually confirming the impossibility (or undesirability) of actually ever appropriating it. In Groysian terms, these artists, driven by an intense, conceptually guided suspicion of the motives of art in general, deliberately try to destroy the materiality of art to “get at” its submedial or ontological source, which (as they are well aware) is reducible neither to materiality nor to conceptuality. Unfortunately, an art that can only approach the real by destroying it or highlighting its repellant character remains trapped forever in the dualism of late postmodernism, which derives a kind of perverse, endless pleasure from experiencing the proximity of the real on the one hand and the impossibility of ever appropriating it on the other. And indeed: the pro forma recognition of the real achieves nothing if the real cannot be experienced as a unity with the sign that represents it. Only this performatist, monist framing, which necessarily takes place below all concept, can in the long run renew today’s art.

There are, however, also specifically performatist, non-conceptual reactions to the disappearance of socialism. The best example of this can be seen in the work of Neo Rauch (b. 1960), who is a product of the academic East German art system and came to prominence only after the fall of Communism. Unlike the many East European artists who juxtapose two or more readily identifiable but incompatible cultural codes in a state of undecidable conceptual irony, Rauch has developed a representational mode of painting that operates entirely below the threshold of concept and cannot be reduced to an ironically conceived stand-off between Eastern and Western discourses.

Rauch’s work, however, also differs from the other performatist artists discussed above because he strives neither for thematic unity nor does he work with simple, intuitively recognizable categories that are “naturally” accepted by viewers. In fact, his paintings seem to do precisely the opposite: they contain a plethora of irritatingly incongruous figures, styles, actions, colors, and objects. A typical (comparatively simple) example is *Pfad (The Path)*, 2003, reproduced in Rauch 2004, 5), which contains three garishly colored, out-of-scale figures (two male, one female) that look like they have been pasted onto a monochrome, half-finished blue background. On this background we see a path leading up to a modernist house on

a hill; oddly standing trees, a basket of mushrooms and what looks like an agave plant border the path, which is marked by a multi-colored logo reading "Path." The figures carry odd objects, including a shiny green serpent-like staff, a purse, a pair of branch clippers, and a liquid-looking green knapsack. Two yellow tubular bars, placed in a triangular formation and having no apparent function, seem to merge with the woman's blouse. The figures are expressionless and seem intent on doing something—it is just not clear just what. The one male figure wears a long, split-tailed coat that might be from the 19th century; the other is dressed like a worker, and the woman in a 1950's style dress and blouse. There is no unity of time or place, and there is no sense that all this has been achieved through the synthetic vision of the subconscious (as is the case in true surrealism). More specifically, we have the apprehension of a distinctly theist, "outside" artist who inserts things into a frame (hence the collage-like figures) and who hasn't entirely completed the work at hand.

Although the different styles used by Rauch can be traced back to such sources as comic books, East German propaganda art, surrealism, and modernism, they don't compete with one another for dominance the way they do in conceptualism. The reason for this is that Rauch's paintings are devoid of any narrative and conceptual purposefulness. This quality, which has been noted by numerous commentators, is formulated most forcefully by Bernhart Schwenk, who stresses the self-referential qualities of Rauch's paintings:

Neo Rauch is no teller of tales, even if he works with narrative elements and motifs. Rather, his pictures are still-lives, symbols of picture-making; he creates, as it were, an emblemology of painting. To experience his pictures thus, the observer must free himself or herself from the compulsion to read a story into them, from the urge to decipher their meaning. . . . If the observer succeeds in avoiding this trap, the pictures reveal a broad and variegated visual code. Although springing from personal and historical experience, they are self-sufficient creations, metaphorical constellations. They create an exterior framework for a more profound content whose significance stretches far beyond the bounds of art. (Schwenk, 2000, 25) In performatist terms, Rauch can be said to create a peculiar inner space that generates neither meaning nor narrative but rather only aesthetic "work" on the part of the observer; it is only this magical, purposeless task that can transcend the jumbled and incongruous givens of the painting. The net effect is that of aesthetic hard labor. The observer is encouraged to work; however, this effort takes place in a purposeless space using signs that have minimal discursive meaning and minimal ties to reality. This type of labor radicalizes the categorical procedures of performatist art discussed earlier by creating what seem to be idiosyncratic categories and by denying unity at the thematic level. The result is a complex, "saturated" kind of categorical intuition that makes the outside world of discourse

seem drab by comparison. Moreover, this inner world becomes the place where history, which has imploded and ceased to develop in both discursive and real terms, is intuitively restarted through the exertions forced upon us by Rauch's art. Rather than dwelling in endless, belated irony, the theist artist tries to restart time using the meaningless but nonetheless somehow significant fragments of the past and the subconscious to create a perpetually active present. Because it is not anchored in any particular discourse, it allows both *Ossis* and *Wessis*—East and West Germans alike—to take part in it on an equal footing. The result is a unified East-West aesthetic consciousness that would not be possible in mere discourse.

Concluding Remarks

Performatism in art is not a programmatic movement,[\(42\)](#) a style, or a moral posture; it does not derive its legitimacy from postmodernism being “bad,” “immoral,” or “arbitrary.” Rather, performatism marks a positive, specifically historical, across-the-board shift to monism in different media and in works of art having otherwise little or nothing in common in the way of subject matter, motifs, or technique. The problem is not so much that contemporary critics have failed to grasp the innovative achievements of individual artists or works of art. There are, as we have seen, numerous perceptive, trenchant analyses of the new, no longer postmodern aesthetic, and there is a widespread feeling that postmodernism is, for better or worse, on its way out. Nonetheless, critics are still loath to take the next logical step and treat these innovations as part of an historical epoch that is irreducible both to postmodernism and to any one of the old monisms like classicism, neo-Kantianism, or the Apollonian. The reasons for this hesitation are in human and institutional terms entirely understandable. For the only way to understand the new epoch *from within*—from its *own* position—is to jettison practically everything that critics have accumulated up to now in the way of analytical and theoretical tools and start again from scratch within the new monist mindset. Unfortunately, there is no way to get around this specifically historical, self-transcending kind of performance. Any reapplication of postmodern concepts to explain postmodernism's historical Other will simply result in a further reification of postmodernism.

Whether the tag “performatism” will ever be adopted as a name for the nascent epoch is, of course, impossible to say; in a certain sense it is not crucial to my project. However, there can be little doubt that the things described by performatism—the authorial or theist perspective, the artificial, forced construction of unities, the use of categories rather than concepts, and the set to unified, ostensive signs—are right now the main sources of innovation in contemporary culture and will remain so for some time. What is needed now most in the world of art criticism is a peculiar conflation of Wölfflinian and Nietzschean virtues: the

ability to think in historical, epochal dichotomies and the courage to smash through accustomed patterns of discourse and reenter history via the new monism.

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Notes

1. This article is a slightly revised version of Chapter 6 of Eshelman 2008. The chapter appears courtesy of The Davies Group, www.thedaviesgrouppublishers.com ([back](#))

2. Gans treats the Kantian affinity of his own theory in Gans 2004, 335-353. The original Kantian concepts are summarized in *Critique of Judgment*, § 22. [\(back\)](#)
3. For more on this see Eshelman 2007, 59-82, esp. 60-64. [\(back\)](#)
4. See, for example, McEvilley 2005, esp. Chapter 1, 15-35 or Danto 1995, 61-78. [\(back\)](#)
5. For a critical discussion see Eshelman 2008, 164-168. [\(back\)](#)
6. See Danto 2003, in particular the chapter "Three Ways to Look at Art," 12-142. [\(back\)](#)
7. For more on this see the historical outline of the ostensive in Gans 1993, esp. Chapters 7-12. [\(back\)](#)
8. This distinguishes it from the structuralist tendency to privilege the sign as icon and the poststructuralist tendency to privilege the sign as index. For more on this distinction see Eshelman 2007, 61-64. [\(back\)](#)
9. For more on the concept of framing in performatism see Eshelman 2008, 2-8. [\(back\)](#)
10. For a detailed study of performance art in postmodernism see McEvilley 2005. [\(back\)](#)
11. A complete pictorial overview of her performances and other projects can be found at www.vanessabeecroft.com [\(back\)](#)
12. As reflected, for example, in the skeptical review of her Performance 55 in Pfütze 2005. [\(back\)](#)
13. Notable exceptions were VB 39 and 42, which used fully clothed U.S. sailors who had the approval of their commanding officers to participate. [\(back\)](#)
14. Which consists of a black woman covered with evenly spaced vertical white cloth strips against a horizontal black-and-white striped background and a white woman covered with evenly spaced, vertical black cloth strips against a horizontal black-and-white-striped background. "Natural" race, in other words, merges with the artificial black-and-white pattern constructed by the artist. [\(back\)](#)
15. Ross eventually does identify Beecroft's performances with a closed situation—namely with the aesthetic simulation of a clinical experiment: "What we have here is the perfect replica of a scientific laboratory in which subjects are asked

to take part in an experiment that will test their reactions and coping abilities to a specific stressful life event" (2006, 80). As Ross quite correctly notes, the performers react to the stress situation by gradually giving up their uniform poses and affirming their own personal identities (2006, 82). This is precisely the goal of all theist narratives: individuation (and in ideal cases transcendence) is achieved by reacting freely to the force exerted by an outer "divinely" imposed frame (for more on this see Eshelman 2008, 19-21). [\(back\)](#)

16. Beecroft, who appears to have no philosophical pretensions, consciously operates beneath the threshold of concept: "What I like about the performances is the live event, the moment where you don't know what's going to happen. It's a question of formalizing an idea without having it appear conceptually" (Kellein 2004, 130) [my translation from the German]]. [\(back\)](#)

17. As documented in Goffman 1986 esp. Chapter 10, "Breaking Frame," 345-377. [\(back\)](#)

18. This sort of deliberate frame breaking can incidentally also be found as a plot device in performatist narratives, most notably in the Dogma movie *Idiots* (discussed in Eshelman 2008, 14-15). There is, of course, also some real-life frame breaking in Beecroft's performances when spectators try to communicate with the models, provoke them, or take off their own clothes (as described in Pfütze 2005). Just how difficult it is to actually break the frame from within is documented in Doyle 2006, 133-135. Three members of a feminist art collective, the "Toxic Titties," surreptitiously signed up to perform in one of Beecroft's most notorious nude performances (VB 46 at the Gagosian gallery in Los Angeles). Although seething with anger at the uncomfortable and demeaning circumstances of the performance, the three "victims" were unable to do anything about it. As one member of the collective later wrote, "I realized I was powerless in this situation. My silent anger was easily subsumed by the artwork. No one could tell my anger was my own and not a possible instruction from the artist. Despite all my intentions, I had sold my body and my voice" (cited in Doyle 2006, 135). [\(back\)](#)

19. In Gans's generative linguistics the imperative is the second basic linguistic form arising out of the ostensive (the imperative is, like the ostensive, still pre-conceptual, but is directed at an absent, rather than a present, object). This relation is developed at length in Gans 1981. [\(back\)](#)

20. A representative English-language edition is Bernd and Hilla Becher 2005. The influence of the Bechers on German photography in general and Gursky in particular is documented in Galassi 2001. [\(back\)](#)

21. A systematic catalogue documenting basic human types in hundreds, if not

thousands, of photographs. For more on Sander see Kramer 1980. [\(back\)](#)

22. The Bechers were presumably not trying to send a direct political message. However, the pictures were made around the same time that heavy industry in the Ruhr Valley, and in particular coal mining, was starting to lose its central role in the German economy, and they reflect a strong popular identification of Ruhr valley residents with the legacy of heavy industry. (This identification is so powerful even today that it has proven politically impossible to close down the highly unprofitable coal-mining industry, which the German government is committed to subsidize until the year 2018.)[\(back\)](#)

23. In his series *Interieurs*, for example, another Becher student, Thomas Ruff, did to petty-bourgeois interiors what Struth did to urban exteriors: he photographed them in a way that made them look entirely desolate. For examples see Ruff 2001. [\(back\)](#)

24. The crushing global dominance of capitalism has made Marxism into a kind of theory of internationalist localism in which the highest virtue is indigenous resistance to capitalism's homogenizing force. In art criticism, this position is propounded most eloquently by Julian Stallabrass (2004), esp. "The New World Order," 29-72. [\(back\)](#)

25. This massive constriction of both vertical and horizontal space is a feature encountered time and time again in the work of Struth and Ruff and fits in well with the Nietzschean motif of "wiping out the horizon" that will be encountered again further below (see the discussion further below). [\(back\)](#)

26. Critics seem to agree on the optimistic outlook of the photo. Marie Luise Syring (1998, no pagination) describes the human figure as being "between heaven and earth, alone and yet surrounded by protective architecture, small and yet not lost." Greg Hilty (1995, 15) goes even farther: he says the bridge "resembles a giant Japanese Shinto gate which frames the otherwise diminutive human subject. The man is miniscule, but potentially heroic; the image is minimal and mundane, but suggests a nodal point of infinite perspectives. [\(back\)](#)

27. This manipulative grounding of the sublime in beauty avoids the metaphysical problems arising in Kant's own argumentation when he defines the sublime as immeasurable and incomparable—and is then forced to introduce terms of comparison into his argument all the same. For a critique of this see Derrida 1987, esp. the section "The Colossal," 119-148. [\(back\)](#)

28. In *Thomas Ruff. Fotografien 1979 - heute* [no pagination]. [\(back\)](#)

29. Gursky's treatment of space has a direct parallel in performatist architecture's techniques of dematerialization and transparency; for more on this see Eshelman 2008. [\(back\)](#)

30. A good way of testing this is to go through a (previously unknown) collection of Demand's photographs and try to figure out just what media event they are about. My own personal identification quotient is around zero, although *Bathroom* (citing a very well-known German magazine image from the 1980's) seemed vaguely familiar when I first saw it. [\(back\)](#)

31. For examples of the visual representation of imperfect theism in architecture see also Eshelman 2008, Chapter 4, 117-160. [\(back\)](#)

32. The painting was produced by carrying out a market analysis of what people like in a painting (colors, abstraction vs. representation) and then combining those wishes somewhat incongruously in a picture. The result is a painting done in the style of what appears to be the Hudson River school and containing, among other things, a large expanse of blue sky, George Washington, and a herd of deer. [\(back\)](#)

33. See his analysis in the chapter "The Lost Horizon" in Groys 1992, 81-83. Groys's (and the conceptualists') basic thesis is that the utopian striving of modernism was always eminently political and hence also complicit in the totalitarian "total work of art" of Stalinism. [\(back\)](#)

34. See Groys 2000, esp. the section "Der submediale Raum," 27-116 as well as the discussion in Eshelman 2008, 164-168. [\(back\)](#)

35. If it would not hopelessly confuse the issue it would be tempting to label this position Apollonian. In Nietzsche's own words, Apollonian form is enjoyed with a "direct understanding"; "all shapes speak to us"; "there is nothing indifferent or superfluous," even as "the sense of its status as appearance still shimmers through" (Nietzsche 200, 20). Performatism, however, is no less reducible to a Nietzschean position than is, say, postmodernism, and the musical synthesis of the Apollonian and Dionysian envisioned by Nietzsche is nowhere in hearing range. [\(back\)](#)

36. Lynne Cooke (1998, no pagination), among others, has noted the connection between Friedrich's *Mönch am Meer* and Gursky's *Düsseldorf Flughafen*. [\(back\)](#)

37. See his remarks in Gursky 1988, IX. [\(back\)](#)

38. For examples see Stegmann 2004. [\(back\)](#)

39. This is also in contradistinction to Edward Hopper's pictures of urban, isolated humans. Eitel's pictures lack the material volume and existential gravitas of Hopper's objects and people; they are emotionally "flat" without being stereotypes. Similarly, Eitel's paintings completely lack the feelings of distrust and malignancy that characterize the portraits of the Belgian Luc Tuymans, who in this regard remains a characteristically "Groysian," postmodern painter of suspicion. ([back](#))

40. The demeanor of Eitel's human subjects is strikingly similar to that of participants in Beecroft's performances, who are made to adopt neutral facial expressions while oscillating between the uncomfortable physical reality of the performance and its artificial, semiotic gesture. For a discussion of opaque subjectivity as one of the basic characteristics of performatism see Eshelman 2008, 8-13. ([back](#))

41. Tupitsyn suggests that after emigrating Bulatov entered into "a state of tranquility . . . with zero-degree alienation" (2007, 244) and that "his paintings [after 1990] were eligible for look-alike contests with promotional posters, sightseeing ads, and other 'life-celebrating' items" (276). ([back](#))

42. Although performatism was not intended as an artistic program, at least one piece of art work has been inspired by it. Using Apple's text-to-speech software, an American artist living in Thailand, Dane Larsen, has created *Performatist Piece with Embedded Text*. Physically, the piece consists of a black plastic pot filled with raw cotton with an MP3 player inside. Using the text-to-speech software, Larsen set up the MP3 player to read the my original essay on performatism ("Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism" at anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0602/perform.htm). The software's distortion of the original text results in a kind of semi-comprehensible speech emanating "magically" from the cotton. The video of the performance can be viewed on Larsen's blog at:

<http://nofote.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2007-01-12T13%3A33%3A00%2B07%3A00&max-results=50> ([back](#))