

Performance and Impoverishment

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Tonight I'd like to talk about "Performance and Impoverishment." I will present my thoughts as a series of propositions and projects.

Proposition 1: When people say "the meek shall inherit the earth," they're not singing the praises of meekness, they're repeating the age-old refrain of inheritance and ownership. The true champion of meekness would say, "The meek shall inherit nothing." And, in their impoverishment they will be... not richer, nobler, better, more loved by god, they shall be impoverished, they shall be meek. But – and here's the radical turn of impoverishment – in being meek they shall not allow anyone or anything else to be meeker, no one and nothing else shall be *more* impoverished. Impoverishment is a mode of relinquishing wealth, power, authority and assuming a position of uncorruptable equality. It may be temporary, it may be in some sense artificial, but it is also a form of generosity, a form of love.

Proposition 2: It's always more fun and more productive to engage in conversation, than to deliver a monologue, a lecture, or a speech. For me, this is especially true when talking about my own work. Sometimes I know what I wanted out of making a work, sometimes not, but I never insist that what I wanted is what you got. For that reason, I feel like I have less authority when speaking about my own work, than I do when speaking about someone else's. With someone else's work I am the audience – as empowered to render a

judgment as any other member of the audience. With my work, I am the one and the audience are the many. I feel less entitlement, vis-à-vis the work. To encourage conversation, I have prepared a series of propositions. I will throw them onto the table, into the room. If you're inclined to engage one, please do: pick it up, throw it back, throw it out. I'd be happy if a conversation ensued. If not, I'll move onto the next one. I've got a lecture's worth of these propositions, but I will consider it a failure if I make it to the end. If Proposition 1 inspires an evening's worth of conversation and I never get to Proposition 2, I'll be overjoyed. Here's Proposition 1 again.

Proposition 1: When people say “the meek shall inherit the earth,” they're not singing the praises of meekness, they're repeating the age-old refrain of inheritance and ownership. The true champion of meekness would say, “The meek shall inherit nothing.” And, in their impoverishment they will be... not richer, nobler, better, more loved by god, they shall be impoverished, they shall be meek. It is this impoverishment, that with your permission, I'd like to keep on the table tonight. And here's the radical turn of impoverishment – in being meek, the meek shall not allow anyone or anything else to be meeker, no one and nothing else shall be *more* impoverished.

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Proposition 3: The artwork can manifest itself according to three broad formations. The first is **the object**. This includes paintings, statues, assemblages, but also photographs, films, audio recordings, and texts. A simple definition: **The object** is stable and precisely repeatable in its outward form. The second formation is **the action**. This includes, performances, flash mob events, theatrical works. The three formations are not mutually exclusive. Many, if not all, of the types of work included in the

category of the object include a performance: the making of a film includes multiple actions. But, again, in the interests of artificially dividing one formation from another so that we can talk about their aspects individually, a simple definition: **the action** is unstable, yet directed, and generally repeatable. The third formation is **the situation**. This includes gatherings around decentralized focal points, for example: parties, conventions, and games. A simple definition: **the situation** is unstable, undirected, and unrepeatable. As reductive as these formations may be, I present them as the corners of a triangle that may help us to contain today's conversation.

Proposition 4: Joseph Beuys must be the artist with whom the term “action” is most explicitly associated. For Beuys, the term was practically synonymous with performance. One gets the feeling that the choice of the word “action” was a semantic one – implying something more overtly political than the neutral presentivity of the word “performance.” For me, Beuys is one of the most problematic figures in postwar art. Beuys's proposal of “social sculpture” was contemporary with Kaprow's happenings and Fluxus performance and predates by more than two decades the earliest relational aesthetics works. That, plus his emphasis on conversation and education as artistic formats and materials is inspiringly radical and still being worked out today. But Beuys was also something of a snake oil salesman, and quite possibly a snake, as intent on self-branding as Warhol, and similarly talented: the adventurer vest and hat, the logo name stamp, the “signature” materials (felt & fat). Beuys's mythologized image, his installation of himself as shaman, guru, leader, and seer, cuts against his proclaimed egalitarian, social, liberatory, aesthetics. It is rarely remembered that Beuys volunteered for the Nazi Luftwaffe and served until the end of the war in 1945. Beuys's declaration that “everyone is an artist,” is a dopey mystical claim that denies the very real fact of artists' work; the very real fact that artists are not born, that artists, like every other socially-constructed role, are conditioned,

trained, educated; in a word, artists are “made.” The artist is not a matter of being, but of becoming. The artist is never finished. The artist is always working toward the impossible finality of the title and the identity: “artist.”

Proposition 5: BEUYCOTT

In an effort to share these objections, I boycotted outside the Beuys retrospective at Tate Modern in 2005. I marched back and forth in front of the Tate, wearing a Beuys-like vest and hat. I carried a sign that said, on one side “Beuycott,” spelled B·E·U·Y·C·O·T·T, like the spelling of Beuys’s name. The other side of the sign read, “I am not an artist... yet.” The point of the work was to find a different way to engage a debate on the points I’ve made above. One could give a lecture, as I’m doing now, write an article, teach a class. But this work created a genuinely new way to engage the ideas, affects, and implications of Beuys’s work. It also allowed me to intimately engage people with whom I would not have otherwise had such direct contact. This is, of course, a kind of performance. But it doesn’t reside comfortably and without remainder in that category. Beuys’s title: “action” might describe it, but that points out another problem I have with that word and with Beuys’s implicit emphases. If this were an action, one would have to credit its action to its actors, those who have acted, who have taken action. That would seem to shift the focus, the responsibility and privilege of participation, in the favor of the initiator, of the one who devised the means of encounter, the one who made and carried the sign. The formation I am calling “situation,” allows for a free, multi-directional, non-hierarchical, dispersal of responsibility, privilege, and participation. I don’t believe the artist can be raised by wolves or, as in Beuys’s case, by mythological Tartar nomads. The artist becomes an artist *only* through a relation with something called an audience: a *socius*, a *polis*. To impoverish oneself in the midst of this relation, is to open oneself to the potential of the interaction. More importantly, it is to open the work. I say “more importantly,” because the work is the space that *both* the artist

and the audience can inhabit. To bare self and work this way is to engage two of the crucial ideas of twentieth century aesthetics. It is both to lay bare the device of the work as Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht urged, and it is the bride (self and work) stripped bare by her bachelors even. So, impoverishment moves in the direction of formalist *estrangement* and Duchampian play.

Proposition 6: In his 1933 essay “Experience and Poverty,” Walter Benjamin similarly tried to thresh the grain of impoverishment from the idea of poverty. He wrote: “For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch.” (As an aside, let me clarify that I wrote this passage before reading this same Benjamin quote in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s new book *Commonwealth*, excerpted in the October *Artforum*. Nevertheless, for reasons I will discuss in Proposition 8, I don’t feel comfortable adopting Negri and Hardt’s equation: “the poor is defined by not lack, but possibility.”)

In a series of essays, Benjamin returns again and again to the theme of destroying or disavowing the value and power currently held by the artist or the artwork. “The Destructive Character” destroys the old world on order to make room for the new; “The Author As Producer” renounces his aura to become an operator in the machinery of culture; “The Work of Art in the Age of It’s Technological Reproducibility” results in the “shattering of tradition” and the “liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage” allowing for the “renewal of humanity.” I owe these observations to Carlo Salzani’s essay “Experience and Play: Walter Benjamin and the Prelapsarian Child.” I’ll be honest and say that I am confused by Benjamin’s prescriptions: build up to tear down, impoverish to enrich, or more broadly his nostalgic futurism, evident in the messianic idea of waiting for the future arrival of the messiah promised in the past. I’ll further confess that there are undoubtedly

similar contradictions and paradoxes built into my notion of impoverishment. I have no interest in defending the territory this term might claim. I only wish to explore it and to come to know it better.

Proposition 7:

Wherever an elite functions, an aristocracy of the aristocracy outlining for aristocrats the shape of the whole man, new values and works of art, far from enriching the oppressed man, increase his absolute impoverishment (Rancière 165).

This quote from Sartre appears in Jacques Rancière's *The Philosopher and his Poor*, a book length meditation on philosophy's uses and abuses of working class peoples. According to Rancière it is the laborer, the worker, the guildsman, in particular, who is employed – don't pardon the pun – for philosophy's purposes. What is this impoverishment of which Sartre and Rancière speak? What does it mean to be impoverished? And what does this impoverishment have to do with art in general and performance in particular? Impoverishment is the relinquishing of the privilege that the artist claims for herself, that the audience bestows, that the recognized patterns of culture authorize. I'm using the word "impoverishment" to distance the specific sense I'm after from the related terms poverty and empowerment. While there is certainly something of wealth and power – or their absences – in what I am hoping to indicate, impoverishment is not tied rigidly to one or the other. Instead, those who Rancière describes as "the aristocracy of the aristocracy" have little to say about performance and less to say about impoverishment. This is what impoverishment disallows: the co-opting of new values or the shape of the whole of anything.

Proposition 8: Benjamin writes that experience, unlike wealth, can be passed from giver to receiver without the receiver knowing what he has received. This exchange often takes place in the form of aphorism or allegory.

For example, Benjamin relates the story of a dying father who tells his sons that he has buried a treasure in the garden. The sons frantically dig up the garden, but find no treasure. In the Autumn, the garden produces the most bountiful harvest. I am currently working on a Twitter based novel, entitled, *A Thousand Apparatus*. It functions allegorically on more than one level. For instance, fiction turns inside out within the world of social networking, where so often, fiction passes as techno-epistolary communication. In this world, fiction and fact indicate each other allegorically, as do the fantastic and the mundane. The characters of a novel are already avatars. So I wonder if, when they enter the online world of avatar sociality, do they become über-avatars; avatars of avatars? or do they fail to register on this surface and disappear? The answers to these questions may obviate the need to confront the allegory of the story itself in which a man named Nil dismembers himself, removing his arms, legs, tongue, and penis, as a means of teaching the world how to live in an impoverished state. It's kind of a buddy story and Nil's buddy is a paramecium whose normally brief life has been extended by exposure to a nuclear blast on a Pacific atoll. Driven by contrary impulses of fame and power and fortune, the paramecium prods Nil along. Nil is briefly a media cause célèbre, during which he acquires a small corps of followers (remember this is happening on Twitter). A journalist named Trewlis, comes to cover Nil's story. He is cynical at first, but comes to sympathize with Nil and, eventually, to see nobility in his folly. At the end of the story – spoiler alert, if any of you are “following” me on Twitter – Trewlis, at Nil's behest, has recovered five of Nil's six body parts. Some he's won on eBay, others he's bought back from one-time devotees who've become disenchanted with Nil's enterprise. The sixth, Nil's right leg, is in the possession of Nil's lone remaining follower and she refuses to part with it. To her, Nil's recomposition of his body is a sell-out, a betrayal of his mission. In the end, the follower, not the dismembered Nil, is the truer believer. I'm disinclined to say any more.

But I trust what I've told you can support the suggestion that the story functions, at least in part, as allegory.

Proposition 9: The last thing I want to do is to speak from a relatively privileged position and say that it is the unprivileged who are truly privileged – in their lack of concern for the responsibilities of privilege or their lack of material encumbrance. It is not poverty I'm championing here. As Alexander García Düttmann points out:

The infinite wealth of sensuous certainty—the truth of which, as is well known, dialectics wants to uncover in poverty—is not just a wealth of fullness, but a wealth of unlimited reorganizations and transformations. (Düttmann)

We cannot simply remove the prefix, “im” from the root “poverishment” to square the dialectic-etymologic circle, converting the poles of wealth and poverty into the wealth *of* poverty. Impoverishment does not move along a track between two poles: wealth and poverty, or power and disempowerment. Impoverishment – as an artistic attitude, as an aesthetic mode of interaction – does not describe a position along a line. Impoverishment is a seeping, a spilling, an oozing. I'm thinking of the way Jean-François Lyotard, describes Deleuze and Guattari's characterization of capital in *Anti-Oedipus*:

There is no dialectics in the sense that one or several of these conflicts should one day result in the breaching of the wall, that one day the energy should find itself freed, dispersed, fluid, on the “other side.” Rather there is a kind of *overflowing* of force, within the same system that liberated it from its savage and barbaric origins.

Interesting that both Lyotard and Benjamin use the word barbaric in their discussions of capital. It would be even more interesting to try to decipher if

what they're describing is a notion of a pre-capitalist society, a proto-capitalist society, or some state that inheres within capitalism itself.

Proposition 10: Impoverishment is the relinquishing, the dispersal, of the privilege that accrues in a given situation. And this is one reason why I prefer to think of situations and not actions. In a situation privilege may be disassembled and disseminated. In an action, it is the action-taker who must retain the position of privilege. That position is action itself. To relinquish it is to dissipate the action, to impoverish it. Impoverishment resides in the design of the work. It is not role-playing on the part of the artist: the hobo, the boho, vagabond. Impoverishment obtains more in Buster Keaton's Stone Face, than in Charlie Chaplin's Tramp.

Impoverishment redistributes material (which may not be physical material). I use the bogeyman term "redistribution" deliberately because, preposterously, contemporary free market-mania, has rendered this thought unthinkable. It might be "conjured," as a specter, but it's certainly not "thought." And sure, I use the term "specter" deliberately too. Communism is just as much a specter in the United States of 2009, as it was in the Europe of 1848. Yet despite these spiritualist overtones, Marx chose not to attach socialism to atheism because, he said, the question of atheism is positionally that of religion. One could say the same of socialism itself, or at least of what socialism has become: its question is positionally the same as capitalism. That is, it installs capital as the ultimate and only judge of value. Impoverishment abdicates and abrogates such judgment.

Proposition 11: [Sound Control] In 2005, I was part of a group known as Unst Collective. For 12 weeks, we created a series of radio works for Resonance, an FM broadcast station in London, England. One of these was called "Sound Control." We invited our listeners and our friends to converge on a guitar shop in central London, which happened to go by the

serendipitous name “Sound Control.” We asked everyone to find a guitar or a bass and an amplifier and to proceed to test out the instruments by droning on the same chord: D major. It’s impossible to say how many people participated in “Sound Control.” We had asked people not to acknowledge each other. The intended effect was of a spontaneous pall of D-major to descend on the shop like the infamous London fog. My best estimate is that we had 15 to 20 people. The D-major slowly settled in and made itself at home. After a while, the employees at Sound Control began to realize that something was afoot. Their response was to try to wrest control of guitars away from those they suspected were involved. So the emergent “technique” of the piece was the ability to negotiate with or lie to the shop employees. Participants tried to convince the employees that they were, in fact, trying out a guitar for possible purchase, and that they were not part of this “thing” that was happening. To my knowledge, none of the participants ever copped to what was going on. We had a person with a pair of binaural microphones moving slowly around the shop, picking up the D-major drone and sending it back to the radio station for live broadcast. Here’s a little bit of the recording of that broadcast. **Sound Control.**

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Proposition 13: Since we’re talking about performance tonight, I’m figuring we can more or less ignore the formation I’m calling the **object** and focus instead on the distinction between the **action** and the **situation**. A recording of a performance is an object, but I don’t think we have much difficulty looking or listening past it to the performance. But why am I intent on calling Sound Control a situation and not an action? Both the action and the situation are unstable. But where the action is directed and generally repeatable, the situation is undirected and unrepeatable. It’s true that Sound Control was directed to a degree: we invited people to gather at a place of our choosing, at a particular time, and to play in a key designated by us. But Sound Control’s situational status is a product of these facts: the participants did not know each other and couldn’t identify each other, even in the midst of the work; the specifics of what to play were not scored (there was no correct or incorrect musical content); there was no conductor or director to coordinate activities in real time, therefore the result of the work could not be said to be “authored” in any traditional sense; the experience of the work, especially in the shop (less so on the radio, and we can come back to this if anyone wants),

was dispersed and variable based on location so that no participant or observer experienced the same thing – this means there is no definitive version or vantage point for the work (the recording we just listened to is but one perspective on the work). Impoverishment is the relinquishing, the dispersal, of the privilege that accrues in a given situation. And this is another reason that I prefer to think of situations and not actions. In a situation privilege may be disassembled and disseminated. In an action, it is the action-taker who must retain the position of privilege. That position is action itself. To relinquish it is to dissipate the action, to impoverish it.

[The question of Sound Control as presented on the radio: it could be argued that the broadcast of Sound Control – the recording we just heard – is an object. The recording is stable and precisely repeatable in its outward form. But, for me, the work of the work wasn't the sound result of the process, but the process itself. One of the rules of the series of Unst programs was that each piece had to take advantage of the specific capacities of the radio as a broadcast medium. If the work could just as easily be presented in a performance venue or via recorded media, then it wasn't for Unst. Sound Control was about making a work that allowed the audience to join in as it was happening. In that manifestation, it is a situation, not an object and not an action.]

Proposition 14: Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “We wish to be self-sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver.” But the kind of gift that the artwork is, need not be borne of the giver’s wealth nor of the receiver’s impoverishment. In such a case, the receiver’s self-sustain is not undermined and the giver need not be forgiven. This kind of gift can be passed from giver to receiver without the receiver knowing what she has received. I’ve performed “Before Your Door (is all the way open)” three times: in London, New Haven, and New York. The title refers to Jack Chambers, who in the 1960s was the most successful painter in Canada. He described his painting style as “perceptual realism,” and said he was after that sense of perception that occurs before your door is all the way open. I am skeptical of claims such as this, regarding a pure, unmediated moment or type of perception. I think

we learn to see and hear. Perception, just like the artist, is constructed. Anyway, in the 60s Chambers started making experimental films and in 1970, he made a miracle of a film called *Hart of London*. Chambers had been diagnosed with inoperable cancer and he made *Hart of London* as a kind of gift for his two young children. It's the kind of gift not borne of the giver's wealth nor of the receiver's impoverishment. The receiver's self-sustain is not undermined and the giver need not be forgiven. In my experience, the receiver does not immediately know what he has received. For a long time it was nearly impossible to see this film, but recently it's been added to ubuweb. And take my word for it, we'd all be better served to sit here and watch "Hart of London" than to debate my propositions. But then Performance Studies probably wouldn't pay me my fee, so I'm going to keep talking.

"Before Your Door" involves a set of instructions whispered into the ears of audience members and passed along to an organist who's job it is to execute the instructions he or she receives. I like a few things about this piece: the audience gets the instructions before the performer, the audience must NOT keep silent for the performance (if they do the performance doesn't happen), the audience has the *ability* to change the instructions accidentally and the *right* to change them intentionally. After the death of the author, the reader makes the text by assuming the writerly role, but this follows from the material fact of words on paper. Here, the audience assumes the authorial role before the material fact of the organ's tones. The door that is preceded here is not the door of perception as Chambers, Huxley, and Jim Morrison would have liked, but the door of authorship, authority, and authorization. This is impoverishment as I described it earlier: a seeping, a spilling, an oozing.

Here's something nice that K. Olive McKeon, a former NYU student, wrote about "Before Your Door," she wrote that what the piece initiates is:

a dispersion of power amongst those present. As opposed to the power dynamics that can occur between a work and its audience in which audience members capitulate to the musicians, lacking a say in what happens and a way to interject their desires into the work, this piece disperses power amongst each person in attendance. The work builds a sociality into the piece such that its manifestation depends on the participation and cooperation of members of the audience. I do not consider it insignificant that its machinic operation utilizes the activity of whispering to and between audience members. Whispering carries a sense of intimacy; one usually whispers secrets or in a context of social and spatial closeness. The use of whispering in the work encourages connection rather than alienation due to the necessary and repeated touch between the participants. The piece operates on a micropolitical scale in its temporary connection between the people present at art galleries in London and New Haven. One may conclude that its scale disqualifies the work from having any viable link to anarchism or radical politics, which may be the case. It may also be the case that the scale at which it operates allows for experimentations with a greater dispersion of power than would be possible otherwise. (K. Olive McKeon, "Art as Micropolitical Anarchism")

Before Your Door.

Proposition 15: It would appear that what I'm ascribing to impoverishment, Lyotard, speaking with Deleuze and Guattari, attributes to capital as a whole. The limits imposed by the bureaucratization of modern society – limits between the economic, the social, the technical, the moral, the aesthetic – could well be porous. Capital itself illustrates this possibility. As Lyotard writes, "Nation, Civilization, Freedom, Future, and New Society have only one Identity: Kapital" (Lyotard, 234). But it's one thing to say that capital overflows and submerges boundaries between epistemological categories, or divisions of societal concern. As symbol of exchange value, this is capital's unique capacity, to translate anything into anything else, to reduce complexity and difference to the lowest common currency denomination. It's a very different thing to say that impoverishment

submerges the assignment of roles, of authority, ownership, control, power, investment, interpretation, assignment of value, assignment of meaning. The overflow of capital is a blurring of instrumental distinctions; of the definitions of what is “proper” to a given thought or activity. The seepage of impoverishment is an effacement, not of value, or the assignment of value, but of the localization and concentration of such assignment.

Proposition 16: It is possible to think of capitalism, counter-intuitively, as the result of anti-materialist thought run amok. To think this thought, one would need to think of a movement away from direct encounter with the physical world – a life in which the individual interacts directly with the objects of the material world and with those who constitute the individual’s social world. One would have to compare this life-world with the modes of interaction prevalent in contemporary techno-capitalism: the symbolic entities of capital itself, of technology, of electronic communication, virtuality, and so on. Both the individual and the *socius* have moved away from direct contact with material and into signifying relations with all the means and modes of existence. This is what Negri and Hardt mean to indicate when they say that capitalism is concerned with the production of subjectivities through “images, information, knowledge, affects, codes, and social relations.” We don’t collect wood, burn it, and huddle around it for its warmth, we rotate a dial to a significant number, thereby engaging a flame that burns an invisible reservoir of fuel delivered surreptitiously by uniformed men who send us a bill that we pay online with credit. The *danger* of thinking this thought: that capitalism is anti-materialism run amok, is the danger of blaming signification for the ills of capitalist society. This is the danger conjured by calls for a return to purity, reality, the land, the hands, the *volk*. Although signifying relations do indeed abound in contemporary capitalism and underwrite it as medium and message, signification is the messenger who should not be shot, the baby who should not be thrown out with the

bathwater. In other words, even if we live in an “empire of signs,” a “simulacrum,” a “society of the spectacle,” according respectively to Barthes, Baudrillard, and Debord, it does not follow that signification is to blame.

Negri and Hardt write: “love needs force to conquer the ruling powers and dismantle their corrupt institutions before it can create a new world of common wealth.” Which brings us back to **Proposition 1**: When people say “the meek shall inherit the earth,” they’re not singing the praises of meekness, they’re repeating the age-old refrain of inheritance and ownership.

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