

utopia, yet to come:
redefining totality through theory and practice

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This paper represents my own work in accordance with Princeton University regulations

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To my Mom,
Thank you for Everything.

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Introduction

In Search of Totality

Throughout this thesis, a form of the adjective ‘total’ is used more than 250 times – yet is it the most effective at describing the topic of study?

The ambition to answer this question began with a pilgrimage to Bayreuth, Germany, to visit what was – according to my then limited research – the seminal realization of a total work of art¹. Picturesquely set on a hill overlooking the city, the Bayreuth Festspielhaus is an opera house designed and built in the late 19th century by German composer Richard Wagner (fig. 1). To this day, the structure is dedicated solely to the performances of his works. Wagner is the figure most closely associated with the concept of a total work of art, coining the term Gesamtkunstwerk in his 1849 essay, *The Art-Work of the Future*². The text defines totality as the effect of an artistic methodology that combines multiple artistic mediums into a pure synthesized form³. With the potential to produce realms of ephemeral utopia, the author proposed the Gesamtkunstwerk as the cure for a fragmented society.

¹ Dähne, Hoekstra, and Ruhl, *The Death and Life of the Total Work of Art*.

² Wagner, *The Art-Work Of The Future*.

³ Wagner.



Figure 1. Bayreuth Festspielhaus. Photo by Petr Karpov, 2024.



Figure 2. Bauhaus Universität Weimar. Photo by Petr Karpov, 2024.

Wagner applied his theory of totality in the productions of his operas, which combined music, drama, and dance to transport spellbound audiences to an otherworldly realm – I was not the only subject who had made the pilgrimage up the hill to the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, seduced by its promise of liberation. My visit to Wagner’s manifestation of totality, however, left me woefully underwhelmed: walking through the building’s front halls, no discernable force transformed me; the walls were not vibrating with a suppressed energy and the air I breathed seemed identical to that of the everyday. The thesis proposal I had submitted just a few weeks ago was conceived around a study of Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk, yet I began to worry that I would never arrive at his promised utopia. The worry only grew with the realization that there was absolutely no possibility of my witnessing the performance of a Wagner opera at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. Due to an exclusivity born from high demand and limited availability, the waitlist for tickets is absurdly long, with some left in anticipation for more than 10 years without getting a ticket. Could totality be this hard to come by?

In architecture, totality has historically been associated with environments constructed by a sole architect in which every aspect of the space is designed under a single unifying concept⁴. The works of Frank Lloyd Wright and Gaudi are most commonly cited, but perhaps the most influential force toward the introduction, dissemination, and development of the Wagnerian total work of art theory in the discipline of architecture was the Bauhaus school and the work of Henry van de Velde. Established at the beginning of the 20th century, van de Velde’s curriculum at the Applied Arts School in Weimar infused totality into modern architectural pedagogy⁵. So – following my disappointment at Bayreuth – I traveled to Weimar. Van de Velde had hoped for his creation of a “New Weimar” to supersede Wagner’s

⁴ Kuenzli, “Educating the Gesamtkunstwerk: Henry van de Velde and Art School Reform in Germany, 1900-14.”, 25.

⁵ Dähne, Hoekstra, and Ruhl, *The Death and Life of the Total Work of Art*, 27.

Bayreuth as a setting of cultural production, while I had hoped that perhaps his success would finally allow me to encounter the ever-elusive totality⁶. Today, van de Velde's Applied Arts School is the Bauhaus Universität Weimar: a modest campus off Gropiusstrasse offering interdisciplinary bachelor and master's programs in fine arts, engineering, and architecture (fig. 2). At a student-run cafe underneath one of the smaller buildings, I sipped mint tea and talked to enrolled students. While they seemed intrigued that I was conducting research for a thesis about their school, they were much less interested in the topic of totality – one student insolently shrugged at my question on van de Velde and asked if I'd like to play him in a game of ping pong. Despite scholarship emphasizing van de Velde's role in shaping the discipline and contemporary pedagogy, architecture students of the modern Bauhaus seemed ambivalent to his influence. The distance between the theorized forms of totality and what little I could find of its practical manifestations only grew: while I could not concretely define the disparity, it was clear that the static forms of history failed to produce a contemporary resonance. Nevertheless, I carefully documented my visits to each case study and stored the field notes and images in separate folders on my computer.

It was the moments during my research in which I was actively not looking for totality, but entertaining myself between visits to the case studies that I stumbled upon environments which affected me most strongly. Upon my return to Berlin, one of my friends – sensing the disappointment of my perceived failure in Weimar and Bayreuth – suggested that I distract myself by going dancing at a techno club. In the middle of the dance floor, despite a sensory assault of subsonic reverberations and fluorescent strobes, I found myself still unable to stop contemplating the chosen research topic of this thesis. I knew intuitively that Wagner's totality had the potential to be an arena for the atmosphere I encountered that night in the rave

⁶ Dähne, Hoekstra, and Ruhl.

spaces of Berlin – playful, unpredictable, and composed of the spontaneous, unstructured relations between liberated bodies. While a manifestation of the ephemeral utopias theorized by Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk, the experience was not structured by the forms or pedagogy of history. It was an environment defined by its participants, in which each member of the audience contributed freely and equally to the creation of a novel social totality.

The experience of my research trip forced an evolution of this thesis away from the confinement of historical analysis: back at Princeton, I returned my books on the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk and checked out ones on play and community, game theory and the carnival. Totality’s origins cannot be this easily abandoned, however, and it is a reality that the form defined by Wagner is incredibly influential – even in spaces beyond its traditional theory and practice. The methodology he constructed is evident in contemporary productions from installation to theater, the branded identities of Ikea or Disney World, and is equally manifested by the spaces of raves and nightclubs⁷. The thorough pervasiveness of a Gesamtkunstwerk design ideology underscores the necessity of developing a modern understanding of the term within academic discourse – though it is not the goal of this thesis to pass judgment on the practice’s founding definition. Rather, by presenting the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk as a dot on the line of a developing theory, this thesis is able to holistically understand an evolving lineage of totality as both medium and method.

The following section presents an introductory discourse on the total work of art by synthesizing contemporary scholarship on totality with the practice’s history. By broadening the scope of this theory with the added perspectives of community, play, and subject interrelation, I explore the definitions, manifestations, and

⁷ Munch, *Design as Gesamtkunstwerk*, 26.

implications of modern social totality in its varied forms. Subsequent chapters expand this theoretical model and apply it to both contemporary and historical case studies of total works of art, ranging from object to spectacle. To illustrate the proposed theoretical framework, the thesis culminates in the documentation and analysis of my own process of producing a participatory artwork – a practice intended as the ultimate articulation of the researched historical and contemporary perspectives. In its conclusion, through a synthesis of theory and practice, the thesis aims to redefine totality and add yet another dot on the line of the methodology’s development.

Defining Totality

Wagner’s totality is a formal totality. While acknowledging the social and political potential of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the model he proposes is foremost a structured and static methodology of artistic interrelation. It is a formula defined by its form: Wagner conceives the artwork of the Future to encompass no more than the traditional modes of artistic production – poetry, dance, and tone (music), which he refers to as “the three primeval sisters whom we see at once entwine their measures wherever the conditions necessary for artistic manifestment have arisen”⁸. Not only does this understanding position these three mediums as principal in their originality, but in arguing that their presence is an absolute requirement in any artistic synthesis – their separation would constitute the destruction of “the stately minuet of Art” – Wagner dismisses any artistic production which sees their absence⁹.

⁸ Wagner, *The Art-Work Of The Future*, 13.

⁹ Wagner, 9.

Form is the manifestation of agency: in choosing a form one is taking a stance, defining that form as superior in their rejection of the others. Thus, Wagner defining totality by its form has forced it to be restrained by his domination. Through his definition of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a formal totality, Wagner's presence is felt in contemporary artistic production and reception – the extent is so far-reaching that Erika Fischer-Lichte, in *The Transformative Aesthetics of the Gesamtkunstwerk*, describes Wagner's lingering influence as “the specter haunting modernism” (fig. 3)¹⁰. Must total works of art succumb to be defined by their form, especially at the level of prescription proposed by Wagner? With contemporary production synthesizing an increasingly diverse range of mediums and methods it is irrational and limiting to confine totality as a methodology exclusively to the elements of poetry, music, and dance – can a definition, then, developed in 1849 still be relevant in defining the totalities of the 21st century?

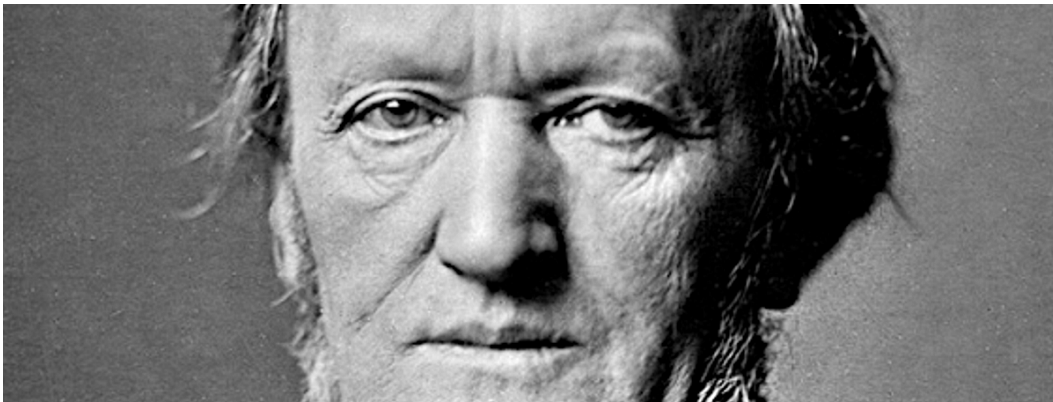


Figure 3. *Richard Wagner*. Franz Hanfstaengl, 1871.

¹⁰ Fischer-Lichte, “Review: The Transformative Aesthetics of the ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’/Total Work of Art as the Specter Haunting Modernism.”, 593.

Fischer-Lichte defines totality not only as the embodiment of a “transformative aesthetic” – encompassing the transfiguration of materials, mediums, and audiences – but a practice that itself has been continuously transformed¹¹. There is a trend in contemporary theory and practice to separate totality from the methodology’s history – from passive and static to formless and dynamic – revealing it to be defined not as a formal structure, but a fluid process of evolution and restructuring¹². Building on this understanding, this thesis proposes a recontextualization of the total work of art through a critical review of the practical and theoretical contributions of contemporary scholars and artists. Based on this critical analysis of totality through the lens of contemporary case studies, this thesis challenges the formal, Wagnerian understanding of and approaches to the total work of art.

By employing Nicolas Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics, the definition of totality moves from formal to relational: this understanding allows total works of art to become not just medium or method, but a dynamic, developing encounter between work, artist, and audience¹³. Liberated from Wagnerian tradition, conceptualizing totality as relational expands – if not destroys – its formal borders. Synthesizing Bourriaud’s framework with Roger Caillois’ theory of play likewise redefines and reconceptualize the total work of art not as an immutable methodology and its static products, but a spontaneous, uncertain, and unproductive process with the potential to provide an escape from the everyday¹⁴. This approach also challenges notions of elitism in the creation of totality: anyone – regardless of age, socio-economic standing, or professional background – is able to participate in the processes and spaces of play.

¹¹ Fischer-Lichte, 597.

¹² Koss, *Modernism after Wagner*, xi.

¹³ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 5.

¹⁴ Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 10.

By engaging with Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* and Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games*, this thesis argues for the understanding of contemporary totality as a social totality – one that gains its experiential and atmospheric qualities from subject interrelation rather than an arrangement of material or narrative forms. Contact in this realm is unmediated and informal, providing participants a relational equality they may not be able to find in their everyday lives. However – Wagner likewise conceived of the Gesamtkunstwerk as a social utopia. In *The Art-Work of the Future*, the author insisted that “the Art-work of the Future is an associate work, and only an associate demand can call it forth. This demand...is practically conceivable only in the fellowship of every artist”¹⁵. Wagner argues that it is not only a possibility, but a necessity that totality as an artistic process be both collectively produced and collectively received. Why, then, do contemporary artists and scholars associate this seemingly egalitarian practice with authoritarianism and cringe at the notion of their practice being identified with the Gesamtkunstwerk tradition? There is a modern understanding of the collective not as the facilitator of the total process, but its victim: in *Modernism after Wagner*, Juliet Koss argues that “the process of fusion extends to the spectator, who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art”¹⁶. The implication of Wagner to fascism has developed an understanding of the process of the Gesamtkunstwerk as one that does not involve subject agency, but imposes an indiscriminate totality on audiences regardless of their idiosyncrasies.

Such a dichotomy in interpretation introduces the critical problematic of agency, subjectivity, and participation within the understanding of social totality. Is the audience occupying an active role in the production of a work enough to break free from traditional models of spectatorship? Is it enough to create the

¹⁵ Wagner, *The Art-Work Of The Future*, 53.

¹⁶ Koss, *Modernism after Wagner*, 254.

theorized utopias of Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk, both subversive and egalitarian in their separation from the everyday? The thesis turns to the writing and practice of Vsevolod Meyerhold as a case study of collective artistic action that complicates the understanding of participatory spectatorship as a cure for absolutism¹⁷. Meyerhold's approaches to Constructivist theater demonstrate that while social totalities collectively produced and received may break free of the dictatorial control of a singular artist-director, they have the potential to fall victim to the uniformity of the collective. In their aspiration to create a realm outside the influence of the mainstream, these attempts at a collectively produced social totality risk producing the exact form of exclusive homogeneity that they sought to escape.

Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* further develops the understanding of social totality as an upholder, rather than a subverter, of established form¹⁸. Debord's definition of totality – as homogenizing, collective interrelations dominated by media – is a warning of the potential for the borderless social totality to erase the autonomy of the individual. To find the subjective singularity within the collective, the thesis turns to Giorgio Agamben's theory of *whatever* being in a collective *outside*¹⁹. Introduced in *The Coming Community*, Agamben's proposed framework presents a community model prioritizing unconditional inclusion over formal homogeneity. The theory of the carnivalesque that Mikhail Bakhtin introduces in *Rabelais and His World* strengthens Agamben's understanding of totality, providing case studies of communities on the exterior of established form that allow for participants to reclaim their agency and subjectivity²⁰. This developed theoretical framework allows for an understanding of a social totality that is not under the sole definition of a Wagnerian

¹⁷ Meyerhold, Vsevolod, *Meyerhold on Theatre*.

¹⁸ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*.

¹⁹ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 8.

²⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

Gesamtkunstwerk, but containing nuance and dichotomies that must be further explored through an application of theory to case studies and the development of personal practice.

Chapter Breakdown and Methodology

utopia, yet to come is a thesis divided into three chapters: the first two are theoretical, structured by the synthesis of a developing model of totality to contemporary case studies, while the third is practical, applying the theory toward the design of a visual arts exhibition. The first chapter of the theoretical section – “Social Totality: Formal to Relational” – considers the implications of a contemporary social totality. In this context, the move from form to formlessness is analyzed through Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics, with Tiravanija’s exhibition at *Aperto 93*²¹ taken as a case study of relational artworks. An alternative, yet equally consequential, understanding of social totality is then derived from the writing of Caillois – a playful model of totality existing between the formal and relational – and applied to Joseph, Parreno, and Perrin’s *Les Ateliers du Paradise*²².

Community is the focus of the second chapter, “Community or Control: Escaping Uniformity within Collective Totality”, encompassing an investigation of both collectively produced artworks and communities formed under conditions of totality. Meyerhold’s Constructivist theater is investigated as an instance that encompasses both understandings, while Carsten Höller’s *Test Sites*²³ and Anish

²¹ Tiravanija, *Aperto 93*.

²² Joseph, Parreno, and Perrins, *Les Ateliers Du Paradise*.

²³ Höller, *Test Sites*.

Kapoor's *Marsyas*²⁴ are chosen as examples of ephemeral communities formed by artistic objects. These case studies are analyzed through a theoretical framework developed from the writings of Agamben and Caillois, which posit that communities existing in the peripheries of dominant form present the possibility for individuals to relate freely.

In the introduction to *The Death and Life of the Total Work of Art: Henry van de Velde and the Legacy of a Modern Concept*, Ruhl declares that “each generation creates its own understanding of the [Gesamtkunstwerk] ideology and follows its own paths within the rich [Gesamtkunstwerk] legacy”²⁵. From the onset of this thesis, it was clear that an analysis of contemporary forms of artistic totality through a solely theoretical approach would produce only partial conclusions: a full understanding necessitated an attempt at constructing one's own totality. The final chapter of the thesis – “Implementing Totality” – documents and reflects on the production of *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?]: a senior thesis exhibition completed for the fulfillment of the visual arts program at Princeton University. The extended framework of totality developed from the theories and case studies presented in previous chapters is applied to the author's own work, and presents a holistic study of totality as method, medium, and community.

The research methodology adopted in this thesis consists of varied approaches to develop a cohesive understanding of the manifestations, methodologies, and future evolution of totality. The argument is structured, primarily, through a theoretical study of the total work of art. An initial understanding was developed through scholarship on Wagner, Henry van de Velde, and the Gesamtkunstwerk, which was expanded by the application of theories on play, community, belonging, and social interrelation. This theoretical framework

²⁴ Kapoor, *Marsyas*.

²⁵ Dähne, Hoekstra, and Ruhl, *The Death and Life of the Total Work of Art*, 16.

was then tested through a critical application to select case studies. An understanding of the chosen case studies was derived from an analysis of visual documentation of the objects, writings and interviews of the artist, and theories presented by relevant scholarship. These forms of representation are understood to be limited, and that an in-person relation with the work may have produced different conclusions. In addition to examining existing theoretical and practical studies of totality, I engaged in the experiential collection of data from a study of total works of art, primarily within the domain of architecture. The research process was conducted in the USA, Germany, and Switzerland and consisted of the following sites: Dia Beacon, Bayreuth Festspielhaus, Bauhaus Universität, Therme Vals, Bruder Klaus Field Kapel, St. Benedict Chapel (fig. 4), Studio Zumthor, RSO.Berlin, and Alte Muenze. The research was rooted in ethnography and phenomenological study, with the intention of being a participant in the creation of the work's social totality. The data was collected in the form of field notes and photographs. While the collected data is not formally analyzed in this thesis, informally, the experiential analysis of totality influenced not only the direction of my research, but had a profound effect on the realized practical portion of the thesis.



Figure 4. St. Benedict Chapel Ceiling. Petr Karpov, 2024.

Social Totality: From Formal to Relational

From a Formal Totality...

Wagner, in theorizing the Gesamtkunstwerk as the coming method of production, presents it as the fundamental consequence of natural process, yet form and type is neither natural nor fundamental. Bourriaud, in *Relational Aesthetics*, writes that “there are no forms in nature, in the wild state, as it is our gaze that creates these, by cutting them out in the depth of the visible. [...] When the aesthetic discussion evolves, the status of form evolves along with it, and through it”²⁶. Bourriaud emphasizes the instability and diversity of form, and this understanding accentuates the idea that the total work of art is not a formal structure, but a fluid process of evolution and restructuring. Despite the far-reaching implications of his theory, it is not preordained that the artworks of the future will be conceived of as a Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk; rather, they will organically grow out of the social conditions that create them. Bourriaud makes clear that it is our doings, as subjects and actors, that create form – by “cutting them out in the depth of the visible”²⁷. Form, then, is the manifestation of an agency, whether it be of the artist, the method, or the audience. Wagner, in his creation of the Gesamtkunstwerk, has extended his agency into contemporary practices and theories of artistic production, and it is only through a redefinition that we are able to reclaim our creative subjectivity.

The total work of art has come far from Wagner’s structure that encompasses solely poetry, music, and dance – from an isolated object or spectacle, it now encompasses the entire realm in which the artwork is conceived, produced,

²⁶ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 8.

²⁷ Bourriaud, 8.

and received. Anke Finger is one theorist contributing to this evolution; in *Acute Aesthetics*, Finger argues that “Gesamtkunstwerk as intersensorial atmosphere moves away from and abandons the toxic, controlling frame and morphs into a variable happening, into an event – steered, navigated by anyone whomever experiences it accordingly, not just by the artist, the author, or the collective”²⁸. The author makes evident that totality – as both artistic method and medium – is in the continuous transitory process from enduring to temporal, from isolated to interconnected. Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* presents a similar framework, one in which the total work of art is produced by social relation and ephemeral action rather than a static model of antiquity. This understanding produces a much different type of totality – one that doesn’t appear as prescriptive, as absolute. It is a social totality: that is not restricted by form and is able to offer greater freedom to its subjects. The following section develops this idea of a social totality through a framework established by Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, and explores the instances of play as a case study of this unique, contemporary understanding of a total work of art.



Figure 5. *Pad Thai*. Rirkit Tiravanija, 1992.

²⁸ Finger, “Acute Aesthetics.”, 221

...Towards a Relational Totality

If there is a form that will redefine contemporary artistic medium and method, Bourriaud believes it is one that is formless. It is not a formlessness of ambiguity, but one that, by departing from traditional frameworks of artistic production, moves towards Finger's proposition of the total work of art as one that incorporates effects, events, and "variable happenings"²⁹. Bourriaud's model of relational aesthetics encompasses two distinct understandings of a formless artwork. The first is literal: in defining his theory, Bourriaud argues that "the contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material forms: it is a linking element"³⁰. The author's conception of form expands the borders of artistic production to include not only the realized physical work, but the entire realm of subject interrelations and effects it produces. This methodology is manifested in the types of artworks that are created and received simultaneously, consisting exclusively of the interaction between actors and spectators – and many times only between members of the audience. As the art in such instances is both produced and received in the gallery, it transforms the perception of the space from a formal backdrop to an active participant in the creation of the work.

While Bourriaud's interpretation of an artwork's form as a bonding agent – its "linking element" – may appear comparable to Wagner's conception of the Gesamtkunstwerk as a formal synthesis, the two theories are juxtaposed by an important distinction. For Bourriaud, the material that is bonded are not mediums, but the individual, subjective experiences of an audience: he writes that "art *keeps together* moments of subjectivity associated with singular experiences"³¹. The

²⁹ Finger.

³⁰ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 7.

³¹ Bourriaud.

formless structure of a total artwork under this model, then, synthesizes not only artistic practices, but the effects they produce, the relationships they construct, and an agency beyond that of an artist and intended audience.



Figure 6. These Associations at the Turbine Hall. Tino Sehgal, 2011.

An understanding of a work's totality as more than a material object or isolated spectacle leads to Bourriaud's second conception of art as a formless medium: a formlessness embodied by a total work of art's symbolic break from the structure that has historically defined it. While his understanding of form as synthesis takes the same starting point as Wagner's, Bourriaud further isolates his theory by arguing that contemporary notions of form have progressed from those of history. The author argues that it is inconceivable that while aesthetic theories, modes of production and spectatorship, and social conditions have so greatly developed, the form of the total work of art has remained constant. The following

excerpt highlights Bourriaud's theoretical argument on the separation of contemporary total synthesis from the practice's history:

“Today, the "glue" is less obvious, as our visual experience has become more complex, enriched by a century of photographic images, then cinematography (introduction of the sequence shot as a new dynamic unity), enabling us to recognise as a "world" a collection of disparate elements (installation, for instance) that no unifying matter, no bronze, links.”³².

In this quote, Bourriaud represents the synthesis of mediums – the foundation that Wagner built his theory of the Gesamtkunstwerk on – as unremarkable as glue and as restricting as chains. And why should it be such a defining trait? Why should the form a contemporary artwork takes restrict its subjective effects and experiences? Bourriaud argues that the mediums developed following Wagner's death are naturally synthetic, and have not only pushed the boundaries of total works of art outwards, but transformed the audience that receives their effects. By expanding the visual vocabulary of contemporary spectators, artistic totality not only responds to social structures but has an active role in shaping them. The author continues to theorize that coming technologies and practices will expedite this process, citing computer programs as an example of a form that – while only seeing recent development – has been both influential to and influenced by social totalities. Bourriaud's understanding of total works of art as processes isolated from their historical context allows for a greater freedom in production and reception of the practice.

³² Bourriaud, 8.

Let us return to Bourriaud's thesis, now presented in full, of relational aesthetics as a formless, evolving totality: the author writes that "the contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line"³³. In biology, agglutination is the process of particles, usually bacteria or blood cells, collecting into a clump as a response to an external factor (fig. 7). In Bourriaud's process of relational artworks, the particles represent the material artwork, the spaces it occupies, and the relationships and communities it constructs. For the author, even if the external factor that prompts this process of artistic and subjective interrelation is the agency of an artist-director, it is not controlled by a singular entity – it is a natural process that is centered on the subject. This ultimately frees the total work of art from the immutability of its history: as a "dot on a line" the total work of art as a mode of artistic production is dynamic and continuously evolving.

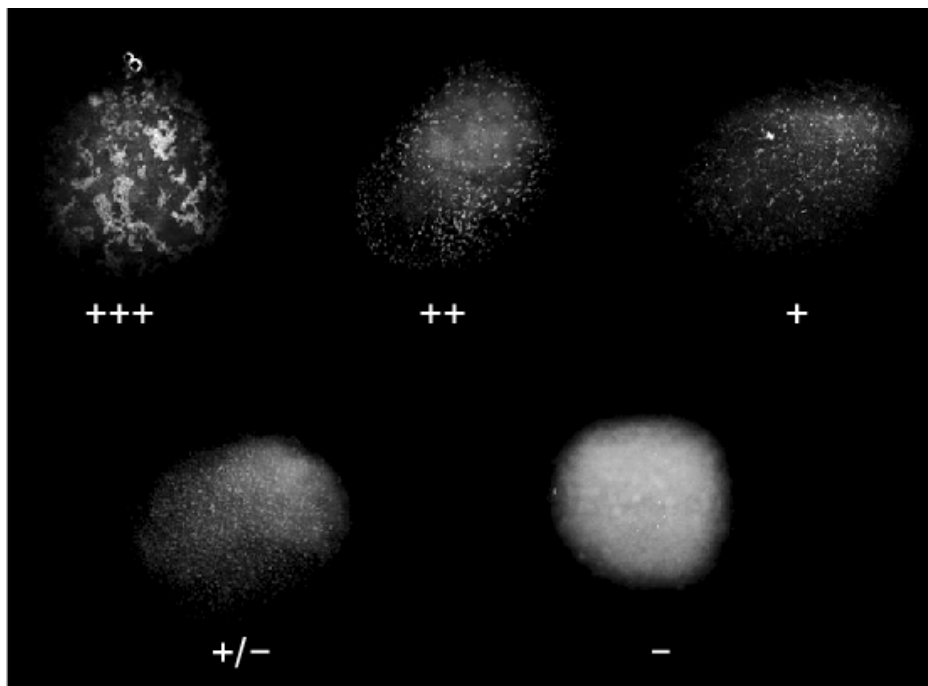


Figure 7. Visual Definition of Agglutination Reactions. Cheng Tang, 2010.

³³ Bourriaud, 7.

Bourriaud develops his theory of relational aesthetics in response to a world that he deems overly governed by formally structured environments and interactions. The dilemma that the author puts forth is interesting as, while acknowledging that the development of communication technologies has streamlined socialization, to Bourriaud, this is the root of the problem: he writes that "the present-day social context restricts the possibilities of inter-human relations all the more because it creates spaces planned to this end"³⁴. It is increasingly unlikely that one will hear anything unexpected during a meeting over Zoom or Skype – a dirty joke or obscene anecdote, for example – and even more unlikely that one would be forced to speak to an individual they were not expecting to or knew nothing about. As a reaction to such contemporary methods of connection erasing social impurity or improvisation, Bourriaud's relational aesthetics seeks to reclaim spaces and communities of spontaneous, personal relations – not necessarily immoral or outrageous, but certainly unstructured and free.

Bourriaud argues that above all – above its commercial or representational value – artworks are meant to embody a "social interstice"³⁵; an interstice is a fissure, an intervening space, and was a term employed by Karl Marx to describe barter-based communities outside capitalist influence. The social spheres produced by relational aesthetics operate similarly, in that they provide a possibility for an interrelation outside those imposed on society by the dominant form – Bourriaud describes these realms as free areas "whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life"³⁶. The social totality relational artworks construct is unplanned, free, and spontaneous – liberated from the spaces, times, and forms of convention or

³⁴ Bourriaud, 6.

³⁵ Bourriaud, 8.

³⁶ Bourriaud, 6.

tradition. While his theory is structured around collective relations, Bourriaud nonetheless emphasizes its benefit for the individual subject, arguing that the model is important in its “potential for the individuals to acquire an identity and a voice through their participation in a group”³⁷.



Figure 8. *Untitled (Free)*. Rirkrit Tiravanija, 1993.

Bourriaud turns to Rirkrit Tiravanija’s work at *Aperto 93*³⁸ for the 1993 Venice Biennale as a case study for his theory of relational aesthetics. Tiravanija’s exhibition consisted of stacks of cardboard boxes filled with ramen packets and a large pot of water, kept on boil by a gas burner (fig. 8). The artist invites spectators to synthesize the materials into a meal – thus becoming participants in the creation

³⁷ Bourriaud, 14.

³⁸ Tiravanija, *Aperto 93*.

of the artwork – or not, the agency to join always remains on the part of the audience. Bourriaud utilizes Tiravanija’s work as an example of a participatory artwork, but also as one that escapes formal medium classification: is it a sculpture or installation? a performance or an act of activism? Bourriaud ultimately defines it as “a relationship with the world rendered concrete by an object”³⁹. In this case study, the method of the artwork’s production – its “relationship with the world” – is divorced from tradition both spatially and temporally. By introducing such a democratic form – one of a simple kitchen – into the gallery space, Tiravanija transforms the space from one of elite institutionalism into one that is exceedingly democratic. It is an illustration that today’s totality is no longer exclusively produced in the artist’s studio and received in the opera house or art gallery: Tiravanija’s exhibition demonstrates that by shifting the dimension of a work’s creation to its exhibition space, not only the willing spectators, but the space takes on an active role in the totality’s creation.



Figure 9. Installation view of Tiravanija's Untitled 1990 (Pad Thai). MoMA PS1, 2023,

³⁹ Bourriaud, 22.

While the work is formal, Bourriaud argues that this is because Tiravanija “does not dodge materialisation, but deconstructs the methods of making the art object into a series of events, giving it a proper time frame, which is not necessarily the conventional time frame”⁴⁰. The time frame that Tiravanija chose for the methodology of the exhibition is the amount of time it would take for dehydrated noodles to become soup – his medium is the inter-human relations that have the potential to occur during these 2.5 minutes. In relational aesthetic’s construction of social realities, subjects become the total work of art’s medium. Bourriaud presents examples of artworks with even more radical spatial and temporal borders: the author describes free parties lasting several days, choreographed performances by factory assembly line workers, and experiments based on the selective breeding of chaffinches⁴¹. Through these examples it would seem that borderlessness is the fundamental ambition of total artworks, unbound by conventional forms of medium and method.

As scholars and practitioners spur the change from a purely aesthetic and form-bound to a socially embedded understanding of art, the scope and impact of the total work of art has likewise grown. Bourriaud argues that the transition is epitomized by “art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space”⁴² It is a move from seclusion to inclusion, from the private to the public. Exposing the systems of totality and freeing it from the constraint of form has made the process become clearer, participation easier, and the method more social.

⁴⁰ Bourriaud, 25.

⁴¹ Bourriaud, 2, 39.

⁴² Bourriaud, 14.

Between the Relational and Formal

Form, argues Bourriaud, is “defined as an outline contrasting with content”⁴³. This equation of form to an obstruction – a grating fit – leads to Bourriaud’s understanding of a formless art methodology and the development of his theory of relational aesthetics. Yet is there a way to avoid this dichotomy? to not accept an artwork’s content and outline as contrasting, but find a synthesis between the two? Proposed by Roger Caillois in *Man, Play, and Games* as existing between the formal and spontaneous, the content and the outline, are the spaces and processes of play⁴⁴. Applying Caillois’ theory of play to the totality of artistic production might provide the sought after synthesis between the formalism of a Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk and Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics. This section explores case studies of temporary liberation, whose total, rigid structure is a facilitator of free, subjective interactions.

The idealized atmosphere that totality strives to achieve – utopian and borderless, without distinction between creator, actor, and audience subjectivity – is the same one effortlessly achieved by any gaggle of children at play. Yet the practice’s mimicry of the act and spaces of play has been a largely overlooked quality of the practice – perhaps due to their unserious nature or their association with the child-like. Yet, it is not only playground games that can be characterized by Caillois’ definition of play: in his conception of relational aesthetics, Bourriaud argues that “artistic activity is a game, whose forms, patterns and functions develop and evolve according to periods and social contexts”⁴⁵. The environments of both play and relational artworks are ephemeral and transient, manipulating people as

⁴³ Bourriaud, 7.

⁴⁴ Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*.

⁴⁵ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 14.

their medium and acquiring their form from subject participation, experience, and interrelation. They are both based on social realms, with Caillois arguing that “the different categories of play...presuppose not solitude but company”⁴⁶. Finally, the totality that is produced by both Caillois’ play and Bourriaud’s relational artworks is a form that centers individual subject’s agency.

As expressed in *Relational Aesthetics*, contemporary totalities are moving in a direction that is increasingly dynamic and social – analyzing them through a theory of play provides a better understanding of the manifested forms of these social totalities. The two elements of totality at the center of this chapter – form and individual subjectivity – converge to establish the most holistic definition of Caillois’ theory of play: a process of free movement within a rigid structure⁴⁷. This rigid structure that defines play can be spatial or social; in either case, it is total: Caillois writes that the form of play is “imperative and absolute, beyond discussion”⁴⁸. As the utopian, egalitarian environments created by this type of social totality can be easily shattered by someone refusing to play by the rules, anyone who does not adhere to its form is no longer eligible to participate – it is the notion of a ‘sore loser’. From this initial framing by Caillois, play can be defined as a social interstice, existing adjacently to the everyday, best characterized by its quality as separate and free.

Caillois’ understanding of play as separate is predicated on the idea that it is a form of social totality that is disconnected from the established order – the author writes that “in effect, play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged in with precise limits of time and place”⁴⁹. This effect is most apparent in its physical manifestation: in play

⁴⁶ Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 40.

⁴⁷ Caillois, 7.

⁴⁸ Caillois, 7.

⁴⁹ Caillois, 6.

spaces, it is the formal, spatial qualities that denote the parameters of a subject's realm of action and interrelation. Just as the chess board dictates how many squares a player may advance their queen, the formal space of the stadium, stage, arena, and gallery has an important role in shaping the movements of its audiences. Yet, as will be seen from the following discussion of case studies, it is likewise the behavior of the participants of play that define these environments – in this way, play spaces act as a two-way channel between form and collective use. The same is true for play spaces' temporal quality: as a realm that can only be accessed at specific times, the space controls its subjects. However, one only has to see a playground during recess or a techno club after midnight to understand the extent to which an audience's social relations during these brief moments bring the play space to life. Through this reciprocal relationship between formal space and ephemeral use, the act and spaces of play embody their transient, ritualistic nature. It is an aspect verging on the sacred, with Caillois describing the domain of play as “a restricted, closed, protected universe: a pure space”⁵⁰. This spatial purity that the author presupposes is the safeguard of an isolated form from an invasion by the everyday.

The totality manifested by play is not only separate from the everyday through strict boundaries of time and space, but a governing form that – in itself – represents an interstice. Caillois argues that this rupture necessitates a “special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life”⁵¹, and, in the following excerpt, the author analyzes the formal operations that such a process entails:

⁵⁰ Caillois, 7.

⁵¹ Caillois, 10.

“The confused and intricate laws of ordinary life are replaced, in this fixed space and for this given time, by precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules that must be accepted as such and that govern the correct playing of the game. There is no reason for their being as they are, rather than otherwise. [...] The game has no other but an intrinsic meaning”⁵².

Caillois makes evident that the forms play assumes is indisputably abstract and irrational, but it is through the unequivocal acceptance of and absolute adherence to this structure that the process becomes total. In some instances, the rules that govern play are not precise, but abstruse to the point of ambiguity: playing with dolls or action figures compared to playing soccer, for example. However, Caillois argues that these case studies should be treated without distinction, as “the fiction, the sentiment of *as if* replaces and performs the same function as do rules. Rules themselves create fictions”⁵³. Even if outsiders may not understand the structure that this type of play takes, for its participants – the one playing pretend; *as if* – its form is absolute and must be kept to this end. In any scenario, whether the rules are common knowledge, fill up a manual, or invented on the spot, they are ultimately imaginary; “there is no reason for their being as they are”⁵⁴. Thus, the realm that forms play is understood and accepted as fictitious – from this quality, play gains its utmost separation from the everyday and becomes absolute in its totality. The strength of this totality stems from the fact that it does not rely on any external forces but sustains itself solely through its own meaning.

Thus far and to no end, the forms governing play have been presented at a level nearing totalitarianism. However, all these components – a spatial and

⁵² Caillois, 7.

⁵³ Caillois, 8.

⁵⁴ Caillois, 7.

temporal isolation, abstract ruleset, and separation from the everyday – are designed in pursuit of a common goal: greater individual freedom. The free nature of play is manifested, foremost, as a willing participation: Caillois makes clear that “a game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play”⁵⁵. Responsibility and drudgery are incompatible with play, which must be voluntary, spontaneous, and susceptible to be resolved with the simple proclamation of ‘I’m not playing anymore’. The freedom inherent to play is further embodied in the process’ egalitarianism – the allure of play, writes Caillois, is “the creation for the players of conditions of pure equality denied them in real life”⁵⁶. Here, it becomes clear why such an absolute, discernible, and insular governing structure is necessary: the fairness it produces cannot be found among other social forms of the everyday. Derived from the realm of tradition or the commonplace, the rules of play are unequivocally impartial, never representing the interest, agency, or influence of outside forces. Caillois contrasts this with the “confused and intricate laws of ordinary life”: the social standards, elaborate bureaucracies, and normalized discriminations one may have to navigate daily⁵⁷. It is impossible to retain a constant, complete understanding of the intricacies of these forms, as opposed to the structure of play, which – despite being totally imaginary – must always be fully understood by its participants. The one at play is under no authority save these abstract forms, to whom they submitted voluntarily and with great enthusiasm.

The forms that govern play, besides providing equality for all participants, create a process that is – as a rule – unpredictable. Caillois emphasizes the requirement of play manifesting as an uncertain activity, arguing that “an outcome known in advance, with no possibility of error or surprise, clearly leading to an

⁵⁵ Caillois, 6.

⁵⁶ Caillois, 19.

⁵⁷ Caillois, 8.

inescapable result, is incompatible with the nature of play”⁵⁸. The totality of games reaches its peak during times of surprise or upset, and, at the moment the outcome becomes unavoidable, play ceases to be enjoyable for both participants and spectators. This consequence of play – creating a social interstice that stands in opposition to the structured and predictable reality of the everyday – is perhaps its strongest parallel to the ambition of Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics: the environments they produce are ones of spontaneity and improvisation. Caillois understands the totality that play space as social interstice achieves, as he writes that during the process of play, “nothing that takes place outside this ideal frontier is relevant”⁵⁹. This is the same process enacted by total works of art: an intense saturation at the expense of a dull exterior.

Les Ateliers du Paradise

In Nice, France, for a month during the summer of 1990, artists Pierre Joseph, Philippe Parreno, and Philippe Perrin occupied the Air de Paris Gallery. From this collective artistic intervention emerged *Les Ateliers du Paradise*⁶⁰ – described by Bourriaud as not merely an exhibition, but a production workshop of social interrelation and subject participation that was “jointly managed by the viewer, in accordance with very precise rules of play” (fig. 11)⁶¹. In this way, *Les Ateliers du Paradise* stands not only as a model of relational aesthetics, but an embodiment of Caillois’ theory of play. It is an instance of an exhibition space as a play space – facilitating creative, free movement within a formal structure defined by its space, its creators, and its audiences. *Les Ateliers du Paradise* is an especially

⁵⁸ Caillois, 7.

⁵⁹ Caillois, 6.

⁶⁰ Joseph, Parreno, and Perrins, *Les Ateliers Du Paradise*.

⁶¹ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 17.

impactful instance of play in that it not only transformed the gallery in which it was exhibited, but introduced a new genre of artistic action⁶². This following section explores this endeavor, centering the analysis through the lens of Caillois' theory of play and Baurriaud's relational aesthetics.



Figure 11. Pierre Joseph, Philippe Parreno, Philippe Perrin. Air de Paris, 1990.

Figure 10. Les Ateliers du Paris. Air de Paris, 1990

⁶² Bonnefous and Teyssou, 1990s art brats.



Figure 12. *Les Ateliers du Paradise*. Air de Paris, 1990.

Honest to its title, *Les Ateliers du Paradise* is the manifestation of an artistic utopia. During their time living in the gallery, Joseph, Parreno, and Perrin succumbed to any whim of their desire, filling the exhibition with their belongings, friends, and pastimes. Assimilation with Caillois' theory of play does not take great imagination, as the artists had created a literal play space: the Air de Paris Gallery had giant toys scattered over the floor, a video game system hooked up to a TV, and a climbing wall that followed the exhibition route (fig. 12, fig. 13). A number of sports instructors, linguists, doctors, and other professionals were invited for their professional guidance; or, to provide diverse distractions for the artists and guests. The opening, especially, was a potent scene of subject interrelations: the artists printed 500 shirts for their guests, each embroidered with a unique word, ranging from 'match' to 'fear' to 'gothic'. Each gallery visitor was thus assigned a random role, one that was fragmented from their everyday identity and only

possessed meaning within the context of *Les Ateliers du Paradise*. The entire month-long exhibition was a game of continuous improvisation, one that Bourriaud defined as a “real time work, which tends to blur creation and exhibition”⁶³. In this manner, the gallery was transformed into an imaginary space, one in which visitors were invited to become participants in a formation of an altered reality of social interaction.



Figure 13. *Les Ateliers du Paradise*. Air de Paris, 1990.

Les Ateliers du Paradise was formless in its multiplicity: outside classification by formal limits, the exhibition had invaded the everyday lives of the artists, audiences, and the seaside town of Nice. However, even with such loosely defined borders, the actions of Joseph, Parreno, and Perrin had created a realm disjointed from the established reality, governed only by the law of their design. The location of *Les Ateliers du Paradise* on the periphery was intentional: Florence Bonnefous, the gallery director of Air de Paris, in an interview with Pierre-

⁶³ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 17.

Alexandre Mateos and Charles Teyssou stated that “we wanted to escape from the center, escape from a milieu where, in our eyes, everything was already defined and obeyed principles that didn’t excite us”⁶⁴. The promise of such a utopia, a unique interstice isolated from the outside world, was a powerful attraction – one of the moths drawn to its flame was Liam Gillick, who drove for two days from London after hearing about the exhibition. Nine years later, the artist shared his impressions in a piece titled *La retour de la vache qui rit*; the following excerpt highlights the existence of the encountered play space as laying between formal structure and subversive freedom:

“*Les ateliers du paradise* changed the order of representation, while introducing elements of game-playing, irresponsibility and pleasure. Yet all of this was framed within a critical structure that was apparent rather than coy, calling to account the potential of a reframed model of exhibition making”⁶⁵.

The endeavor of Joseph, Parreno, and Perrin was subversive in its reframing of not only the Air de Paris gallery, but the underlying conceptions and unspoken norms of exhibition making. Gillick’s quote captures the transformative essence of the work, and its existence beyond form. The author expands on this formlessness by saying that “the gallery, Air de Paris, has no clear designated zones. It is not immediately apparent who are the artists and who are the dealers and who are the critics and who are the curators”⁶⁶. Joseph, Parreno, and Perrin had created a world in which there was no distinction in physical space or social forms – this lack of

⁶⁴ Bonnefous and Teyssou, 1990s art brats.

⁶⁵ Gillick, “La Retour de La Vache Qui Rit: ‘Les Ateliers Du Paradise’, Air de Paris, Nice, 1990.”

⁶⁶ Gillick.

hierarchy meant that every moment, corner, and guest contributed to the work equally. Then, what of the “critical structure” that Gillick argues framed the venture? The form that structured *Les ateliers du paradise* was the actual lives of the artists living in it: there was nothing mystique or mysterious about the process – it was on display for all to see. By designing the exhibition around this simple, yet effective rule, the play that was produced was free, separate, uncertain, and imaginary.

Les ateliers du paradise is a showcase of Caillois’ final classification of play, not yet introduced in the context of this thesis: that of play as an unproductive endeavor. Just as Bourriaud defines the artworks of his relational aesthetic by the relationships they create, the theory of Caillois emphasizes process over material product. He pushes this notion to the extreme, however, writing that “play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money”⁶⁷. In the context of total works of art, this is taken to mean that the process is an end in itself – it is art for art’s sake. From its inception – and as a result of its form and history – total works of art have been forced to carry an incredible burden of responsibility. In steps, this chapter has relieved this affliction: Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics liberated it from the encumbrance of form, and a conceptualization as play from the confines of humorlessness. This final quality added by Caillois, unproductivity, has unearthed the potential of total works of art beyond mere social transactionality, allowing the method and medium to exist solely for itself. It forces the understanding of totality to continue with its constant process of evolution, becoming a sanctuary of exploration and play, unbound by tradition, function, or form.

⁶⁷ Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*.



Figure 14. *Les Ateliers du Paradise*. Air de Paris, 1990.

Community or Control: Escaping Uniformity within Collective Totality

The Spectacle Uniting a Fragmented Society

April 8th, 2024 was an important day for totality. As communities prepared for the solar eclipse passing over the continental United States, crowds of hundreds gathered in town squares and open fields, alert with excited anticipation (fig. 15). The usual social divisions produced by age, professional standing, and political party relations had been shattered – an earned comradery united the masses, with one local news outlet writing that “heads were up towards the sky, while defenses, offenses and opposing opinions were down”⁶⁸. Yet the departure from everyday reality was revealed to be a fleeting illusion, as, only minutes after the period of totality, the collective spectatorship and the sense of unity it provided dissipated. It was an example of the power of mass spectacle to alter perceptions of reality and leave its audiences immobile, intoxicated, and giddy. While the totality of April 8th’s eclipse may have been harmful to those without the proper eye protection, the one at the center of this thesis – produced by artists, objects, and communities – can be just as damaging to individuals; the harmful effects, though, do not receive nearly as much coverage. The following chapter is concerned with understanding the dynamics between the artist, the artwork, and the collective under totality; the role of collective spectatorship and production in community formation, and the function of the artist-director in this transformation.

⁶⁸ Michelle, “Solar Eclipse Brings Sense of Togetherness.”



Figure 15. Princeton Charter School students experience the Eclipse Together. Christopher Heuck, 2024

In theorizing the typology of an artwork of the future, Wagner saw the separation of the arts as an allegory for a social separation: the Gesamtkunstwerk was meant not to only unify art forms, but people and culture⁶⁹. The total work of art was conceived of as constructing a new aesthetic wholeness atoning for the fragmentation of society: Wagner's framing of totality sought to create a reality – whether it exists only in fantasy or is produced by the everyday – that could unite an audience into one through its power of synthesis. This wholeness was conceived of as not only received by and affecting audiences, but to be produced by them as well: Ole W. Fischer, in *Insular Utopias*, describes Wagner's model of totality as an “egalitarian, participatory practice of an artists' collective, which stems from the people and speaks to the people”⁷⁰. Here lies the greatest disconnect between theory

⁶⁹ Wagner, *The Art-Work Of The Future*, 53.

⁷⁰ Dähne, Hoekstra, and Ruhl, *The Death and Life of the Total Work of Art*, 146.

and practice – of totality, perhaps, of Wagner, certainly. The disconnect is the reason why Wagner is associated with fascism rather than socialism. It is why total works of art fall under accusations of producing uniformity, rather than unity. It is why select contemporary scholars identify audiences not as facilitators and beneficiaries of the total process, but its victims: Koss writes that “Gesamtkunstwerk often stands for an artistic environment or performance in which spectators are expertly maneuvered into dumbfounded passivity by a sinister and powerful creative force”⁷¹.

The collective reception of totality has the potential to create ideologically organized communities with fixed roles and inflexible identities in which audiences are “lulled into mindless, uncritical enjoyment”⁷². Lulled, however, implies a harmonious calm, and this is not usually the best characteristic of the state brought on by totality – a more apt metaphor is presented by Roger Caillois’ play type of *ilinx*. Taken from the Greek term for whirlpool and likened to amusement park rides, racing downhill on skis, or drug consumption, Caillois describes it as one’s attempt to momentarily part from the everyday experience: as a “centrifugal state of flight from which he regains bodily stability and clarity of perception only with difficulty”⁷³. Even Caillois’ definition falls victim to a formal generalization, treating the subject’s individual experience of vertigo as a universal state. Caillois equates the practice to pleasure – “because one hesitates to call such a transport a mere distraction”⁷⁴ – and it is incredibly difficult to be critical of an activity or community that provides such pleasure, even when it might be at the detriment of the individual to the collective. *Ilinx*, in itself – as any instance of play – is not harmful; while it may disrupt one’s contact with reality, as a temporary state,

⁷¹ Koss, *Modernism after Wagner*, xii.

⁷² Koss, 254.

⁷³ Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 24.

⁷⁴ Caillois, 26.

returning from vertigo has the potential to leave one with an even greater understanding of their individual and collective identity. However, when such a state is continuously induced through a totality brought on by propaganda or mass spectacle, the hypnotizing power of ilinx has been used by artists, stage directors, and dictators alike to transform individual and communal reality into a regime.

Ilinx is likewise an effective metaphor for totality as both are a process that can be self-induced; in both instances, though, the individual in a state of flux is susceptible to control by an authoritarian power. This is most clearly evident when spectators take on the role creators in a work, however, simply reaching an active spectatorship or a participatory artistic practice is a deceptive goal: Claire Bishop in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* writes that “the binary of active versus passive hovers over any discussion of participatory art and theatre, to the point where participation becomes an end in itself”⁷⁵. Both Wagner’s formal totality and the contemporary, prevailing understanding of collective artistic action – often under the guise of active spectatorship – fail to find harmony between an individual’s subjectivity and a homogenizing social totality. Koss identifies the uniformity produced by such a communal totality, writing that “it became increasingly difficult to distinguish the role of the individual spectator within the communal audience”⁷⁶. Not only participation, but critical participation is necessary to break free of uniformity. Even then, it is not easy: totality as a method of synthesis is, by definition, a homogenizing process. The following section presents the analysis of a framework that attempts to find the subjective singularity within the collective.

⁷⁵ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 37.

⁷⁶ Koss, *Modernism after Wagner*.

The Whatever, the Outside, and the Carnavalesque

Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* will be utilized as this chapter's theoretical framework to find collective artistic action counterexamples of this prevailing understanding of homogenization. A reversal to an understanding of the collective defined by its form, Agamben's theory works with the subjective, unquantifiable experience of the individual as its basic material. In its opening line, Agamben declares that "the coming being is whatever being" – the coming community, then, is the "whatever" community⁷⁷. Understanding this "whatever" is understanding the core of Agamben's theory on communal belonging. Deriving it from the Latin *quodlibet*, Agamben interprets the concept not as a 'whatever' of indifference, but one that translates to a "[belonging] such that it always matters" or "being such as it is"⁷⁸. It is the understanding that the subjectivity of "whatever" being is not defined by the "whatever" community – the justification of individual agency within a produced collective. The following excerpt displays how Agamben's theory understands this principal dichotomy between inclusion and classification:

"Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal. [...] In this conception, such-and-such being is reclaimed from it having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class – and it is reclaimed not for another class nor

⁷⁷ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 8.

⁷⁸ Agamben, 8.

for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-*such*, for belonging itself⁷⁹.

Agamben begins this paragraph by arguing that the individual singularity and its intrinsic subjectivity must not necessarily conform to collective identity or categorization. The author offers a third path, outside the binary of solitary ineffability and a subsumption to the classification of universal form. Being-*such* is a model that redefines inclusion as belonging itself rather than a process decided by immutable properties – belonging to a category, class, or set. Form in Agamben’s framework is significant not for what it is, but that it is. The author continues, however, by noting that the “whatever” community is not blindly indifferent to a subject’s inherent qualities through an indiscriminate, universal love: Agamben argues that his understanding of collectivity does not “neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality”⁸⁰. Rather, in a “whatever” framing of inclusion, participation in a community defined by established attributes is always a choice, but never the obligation.

Synthesizing the collectivity model of *The Coming Community* with social totality necessitates an understanding of the spaces and forms conducive to the formation of “whatever” communities. By arguing that “whatever...is the event of an outside”, Agamben situates his theory of belonging in relation to an undefined, external space that remains “empty and indeterminate”⁸¹. This is an apt metaphor for totality’s methodology, which attempts to achieve an ultimate saturation of being – collective, aesthetic, emotional – into one moment, space, or form. The intense saturation, however, naturally predisposes that outside of it, the grass is less green. Yet Agamben’s framing of an “outside” escapes such classification by not

⁷⁹ Agamben, 8.

⁸⁰ Agamben, 9.

⁸¹ Agamben, 74.

positioning itself in opposition to convention, but on its periphery. It does not succumb to the limitations of traditional binaries or entrenched structure, instead being defined by its potential; by “the totality of its possibilities”⁸². While Agamben’s noticeable effort to not constrain his theory to formal delineation might incite criticisms of ambiguity, the author does allow himself to liken the form and space of a collective “outside” to a threshold. The following excerpt constitutes Agamben’s most formal definition of the nature of his proposed typology:

“It is important here that the notion of the “outside” is expressed in many European languages by a word that means “at the door” (*fares* in Latin is the door of the house, *thyrathen* in Greek literally means "at the threshold"). The outside is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access”⁸³.

The “outside” does not exist as an independent entity, but is characterized by a relation to an inside – to an established mainstream. This defining exteriority, however, is not interpreted to be a limiting factor: Agamben argues that this is the very quality that gives it access, evolving his notion of the “outside” from just “another space that resides beyond a determinate space”⁸⁴. A threshold existence implies a form that is transient and ephemeral, one that is in the state of becoming. Likewise, a threshold denotes a point of entry, of beginning: this conception serves to further liberate Agamben’s framework from the uniformity of established conventions and methodologies. The “outside” represents a metaphorical or physical space of free movement where community formation occurs through a

⁸² Agamben, 74.

⁸³ Agamben, 75.

⁸⁴ Agamben, 75.

collective orientation toward spaces, ideas, and experiences that are not yet claimed, defined, or limited by prevailing norms. In the context of this chapter, it allows us to classify the presented case studies through their relation to a dominant, established form.



Figure 16. *Feast of Fools, Johannes Linglebach.*

The carnivals of Mikhail Bakhtin are a theoretical and practical model of a “whatever” community existing in Agamben’s framework of the “outside”. Through a study of the life and work of Renaissance writer François Rabelais, Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* develops the concept of the carnivalesque – a separate realm of emancipated social interrelation made possible by inversion, humor, and the grotesque⁸⁵. In a reality dominated by a hierarchical social structure, Bakhtin theorizes that the only opportunity in the Middle Ages to experience true, communal belonging was in carnival environments: the author writes that at night, “in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and

⁸⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 9.

age”⁸⁶. Detached from the forms of the everyday, the carnival – as an “outside” existence – is defined by its exteriority. Bakhtin speaks of this voluntary participation in a community free from definition with a reverence befitting resurrection: the author argues that in this separate realm, “people were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations”⁸⁷.

A fundamental characteristic of Bakhtin’s carnival is that it is ephemeral – the liberation that it provides is cursed to be fleeting. The impermanent communities it creates may have permanent effects, however, as in its destruction of social hierarchies, the carnivalesque creates a space for the questioning of their legitimacy and longevity. Thus, it is not only the participants of the carnival that are rebirthed, but in their participation, subjects affect the world outside the ephemeral utopia. This transformative potential is manifested in a threshold space that Bakhtin describes as a “feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed”⁸⁸. Similarly to a community existing in the “outside”, even though the carnival is formed in the periphery, it is a social totality that may have lasting effects on the mainstream.

Although derived from a case study drawn out of antiquity, the model of Bakhtin’s carnival has many contemporary counterparts, both theoretical and practical. The relational artworks proposed by Bourriaud – with their emphasis on a realm created through spontaneous and free contact – naturally embody elements of the carnivalesque. As do the processes and spaces of Caillois’ play: not only are they similar in their unserious nature – rarely do the actions one takes in games or carnivals negatively impact them in the everyday – but play likewise creates environments of egalitarianism and pure waste. While perhaps not as precious, contemporary carnivals have the potential to be included in Bakhtin’s framework,

⁸⁶ Bakhtin, 9.

⁸⁷ Bakhtin, 10.

⁸⁸ Bakhtin, 10.

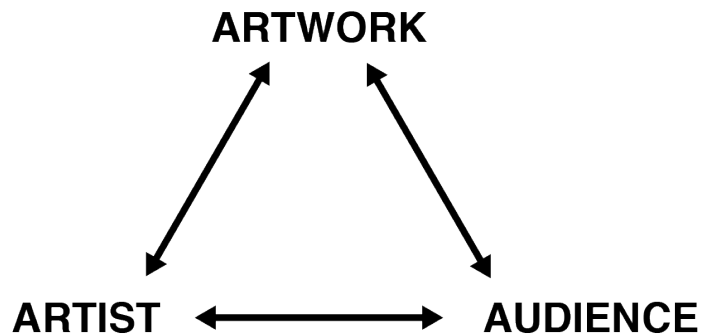
as do concerts, raves, parties, and parades. All of these examples, as spaces on the exterior of everyday social form, exist in Agamben’s “outside” and promote a “whatever” framework of inclusion. The communities they create are a possibility for individuals to free themselves from who they constantly have to be.

Meyerhold’s Theater: A Totality Collectively Produced and Received

To answer the question of authorship in a total work of art – whose totality? – necessitates an analysis of the interaction between the independent agents of artist, artwork, and audience. Mark Windsor, author of *Art of Interaction: A Theoretical Examination of Carsten Höller’s Test Site*, defines the relationship as follows: “the artist acts as an agent to create the work of art; the work of art conveys the agency of the artist to the recipient; the recipient is a ‘patient’ of the artist’s agency carried by the work”⁸⁹.



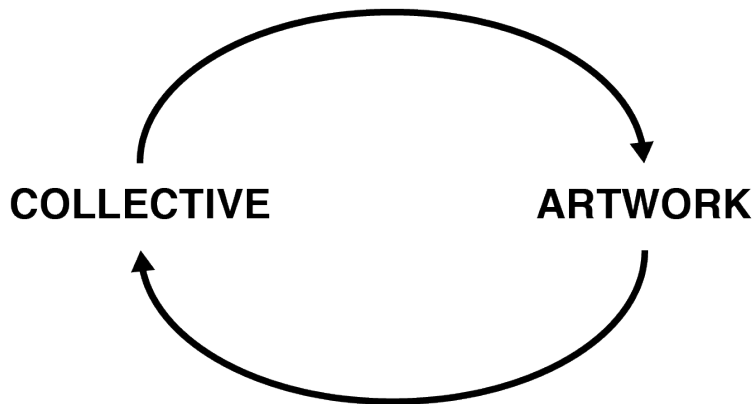
⁸⁹ Windsor, “Art of Interaction.”



This equation is complicated however, when recipients have an active role in the creation of the work. Spectators granted the active role of production gives them the potential to instill the work with their own individuality, freeing them from the artist's agency. It is a totality not of the artist, but of the community; Windsor's theory can thus be amended. Instead of a linear progression of influence from artist, to artwork, to audience, it becomes a model represented by a triangle, with artist, artwork, and audience each constituting one of the three vertices. It is not an equilateral triangle, sure – simply through the act of conceiving the work, the role of the artist will always hold more influence – however by granting the audience the power of production, rather than solely reception, their agency undoubtedly grows.

Post-revolution Russia of the 1920's exists, perhaps, as the most extreme example of an ideology of collective artist production. Understanding the effective potential of cultural processes – art, literature, theater, and music – in unifying society, the Constructivists conceived of their production as one with an obligation toward communal improvement. Artistic production became a recognized form of labor, and, as with any other form of labor in post-revolution Russian society, understood to be a social, rather than individual enterprise. This was not simply an

ideal, but a requirement: creativity, originality, conception, and execution were all transformed into a collective practice. By regulating these processes – understood before as being integral to the role of the individual artist – to the commune, the Constructivist model of collective artistic substitutes the agency of the author, with that of the collective. Bishop analyzes the mode of cultural production as one that “should be rationalised as if it were an industry, leading to a redefinition of authorship in which originality was no longer understood to be an independent expression of the artistic subject”⁹⁰. Along with the creative process, the artist becomes a part of the collective and their realized work was produced through a communal understanding of the established order.



The structure introduced by Constructivists effectively eliminates a vertice in the triangular model of totality established in the previous section: with the artist occupying the same role as the audience, the only relationship that remains is between the artwork and the collective. This formula produces the ultimate total process – the updated model can be imagined as a loop, a self-fulfilling mechanism

⁹⁰ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 51.

in which the community produces the work and the work produces the community. The Constructivists had created a perpetual motion machine powered by culture and society. There is no room for abstract form in this artwork: it is one that reflects the everyday, as this is the realm that birthed it. In some instances, the recreations of reality were more substantial – more real – than the event they were derived from. An example is the mass spectacle of Nikolai Evreinov depicting the storming of the Winter Palace which brought in an audience of over 100,000 – Bishop describes the spectacle as “very effective and much better organised than the actual storming of the Winter Palace, which had been full of confusion”⁹¹ (fig. 17). These reenactments bolstered community and collective memory: citizens that had not been part of the historical moment, now could play a part as actors in its recreation.



Figure 17. Storming the Winter Palace Recreation, 1917.

⁹¹ Bishop, 59.

The theatrical spectacles produced by Vsevolod Meyerhold provide a useful case study of the Constructivist model of communal artistic production prevalent in 1920's Russia. Meyerhold, in theory, sought to revolutionize theatrical productions through a collective participation and renouncement of fantasy. The stage director understood the streets as the closest and most consequential stage to the spectator: his 1923 productions of *The Earth in Turmoil* were performed for audiences of up to 25,000 and "on a number of occasions as an open-air spectacle, being freely adapted to various settings"⁹². The reality of Meyerhold's practice, however, demonstrated total control over his material of stage and man; this conflict between individual artistic practice and the established Constructivist method of communal production constitutes the largest contradiction in Meyerhold's writing, and was one of the reasons for the stage director's downfall. The following quote from *Meyerhold on Theater* demonstrates the contradiction – a conflict between the author's understanding of the role his audiences played in a spectacles production and a desire to construct his own totality:

"Every single problem which concerns the modern theatre comes down to the same question: who is capable of rousing the audience's enthusiasm and what means should he employ? If the modern theatre is to justify its existence, it must not purvey some pointless commercial fiction: it must inspire the audience to leave the performance determined to tackle the task of construction with renewed vigour"⁹³

In this quote, Meyerhold does not speak of influencing individual spectators – he conceives of his audience as one collective. This "task of construction" which

⁹² Meyerhold, Vsevolod, *Meyerhold on Theater*, 189.

⁹³ Meyerhold, Vsevolod, 168.

Meyerhold delegates to the collective is crucial: it illustrates the Constructivist model of constructing an ideal society through cultural production. In *Meyerhold on Theater*, the author references this process of construction throughout, interchanging between the terms construction, realization, and consolidation – in each instance Meyerhold grants it, in full, to the collective. The author cautioning theater to not “purvey some pointless commercial fiction” is an appeal to further separate modern spectacle from its roots in fantasy. From this conception of an everyday theater Meyerhold realized his communal spectacle – bringing the stage to the realm of the spectator and eliminating all abstraction which did not serve utility – yet in his ambition of a collective totality, the artist-director did nothing to diminish his role in the total design process.

The clash between the individual and the collective in cultural production is highlighted in the seemingly innocent question Meyerhold poses to readers: “who is capable of rousing the audience's enthusiasm and what means should he employ?”⁹⁴. Not only does it read rhetorically – the author is undoubtedly speaking of himself – but in its structure Meyerhold separates the artist, “he”, from the collective. This pursuit of individual authorship is evident throughout Meyerhold’s practice: not only was he interested in instilling a structure that regulated and standardized the movements of his actors, but the stage director would alter the scripts of his theater productions in an attempt to synthesize concept, narrative, and production. Meyerhold’s aspiration was not an active subversion of the established mode of production, but the construction of his own totality – Bishop writes that “[the artist] seems less interested in the formation of a counter-public sphere than in the creation of a sovereign domain of which he is the sole organizer”⁹⁵. This ambition for ownership – a return to the original totality, one derived not from the

⁹⁴ Meyerhold, *Vsevolod*, 168.

⁹⁵ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 146.

collective, but the singular artist – directly contradicted the established order of post-revolution Russia and was ultimately Meyerhold’s downfall: the stage-director was arrested on June 20th, 1939 on accusation of formalism and executed 7 months later on charges of espionage.

Besides creating theatrical productions cursed with a uniforming totalitary, the requirement that art be derived from everyday collective labor gave birth to artworks that were – in essence – uninteresting. Describing the reality of theater under these conditions, Bishop writes that “the state demand for drama dealing with contemporary issues had fueled an epidemic of bad plays”⁹⁶. In a spectacle that was produced only through contemporary, societal associations, spectators truly had no escape from the everyday. A bland artistic output was the natural outcome of an equation that only encompassed culture and society – no matter how entertaining or revolutionary it may be at the outset; a continued recycling would eventually dull down any reference material into an insipid flatness.

The case study of Meyerhold’s theater exposes the inherent problematic of artistic and cultural production as a communal venture: although the collective – encompassing the agents of both spectator and artist – assumed the role of creator, they had no agency in the work that was created. Bishop, quoting Walter Benjamin, points out that “fascism is precisely the political formation that allows people to participate in, and enjoy, the spectacle of their own destruction”⁹⁷. The requirement that a work of art must follow such a rigid structure – of communal production and social representation – in itself, is an embodiment of a stifling totalitarianism. Any example from the model of Constructivist, collective artistic action could not be outside of the established order, as in 1920’s Russia, it was the only accepted mode of labor.

⁹⁶ Bishop, 55.

⁹⁷ Bishop, 49.

Reconciling Totality with Plurality

If the Constructivists of post-revolution Russia understood communal artistic production as a form of labor, Bakhtin – through his theory of the carnival – conceptualizes it as play. The model is analogous to the one presented by Caillois; of his classification of play, the most notable are its qualities as separate and free. The separate aspect Caillois defines as being “circumscribed within limits of space and time” – formed for a specific event and disbanded upon its completion, a collective outside is characterized by its temporality⁹⁸. Agamben, though, would add that this separation can also be understood to exist outside social structures. These are communities, then, that exist only because of the temporary suspension of the common social order. This rupture from the structures that govern the everyday creates a space of free movement, offering individuals of collective outsides an agency they may struggle to achieve otherwise. This freedom, the most defining characteristic of Caillois’ play, is manifested as movement without authority, voluntary participation, and the power of individuals to choose what communal role they occupy. Embodying all these qualities, collective outsides are communities of collective resistance to the mainstream – anarchic in their purposeful break from the established order and utopian in their promised freedom. In contemporary art production, the object has overtaken the spectacle – the gallery has become a more popular stage than the theater. In Windsor’s model of the artist’s agency being transferred to spectators through the work, the author writes that “art objects are the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents”⁹⁹. Through the direction of the artist, the object becomes an actor on the stage of the gallery space, inspiring, provoking, or uniting; overall, affecting its audiences. The

⁹⁸ Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 9.

⁹⁹ Windsor, “Art of Interaction.”

community that is created around the exhibition of art objects moves in the direction of Agamben's "outside" by providing novel, undefined experiences, outside the everyday, that join spectators in a temporary union. It is a separate reality, defined by the limits of an exhibition space and its hours of operation, and – in the case of works that attempt to subvert conventional modes of spectatorship – offers its individual participants an operational freedom and creates communities of "whatever" being. In the following section, the case studies of Carsten Höller's *Test Sites* and Anish Kapoor's *Marsyas* exhibition at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall will be analyzed to determine if the community they create exists in the peripheries of the mainstream, providing an experience that is not under the control of a dictatorial artist, but one that is organized by the collective.

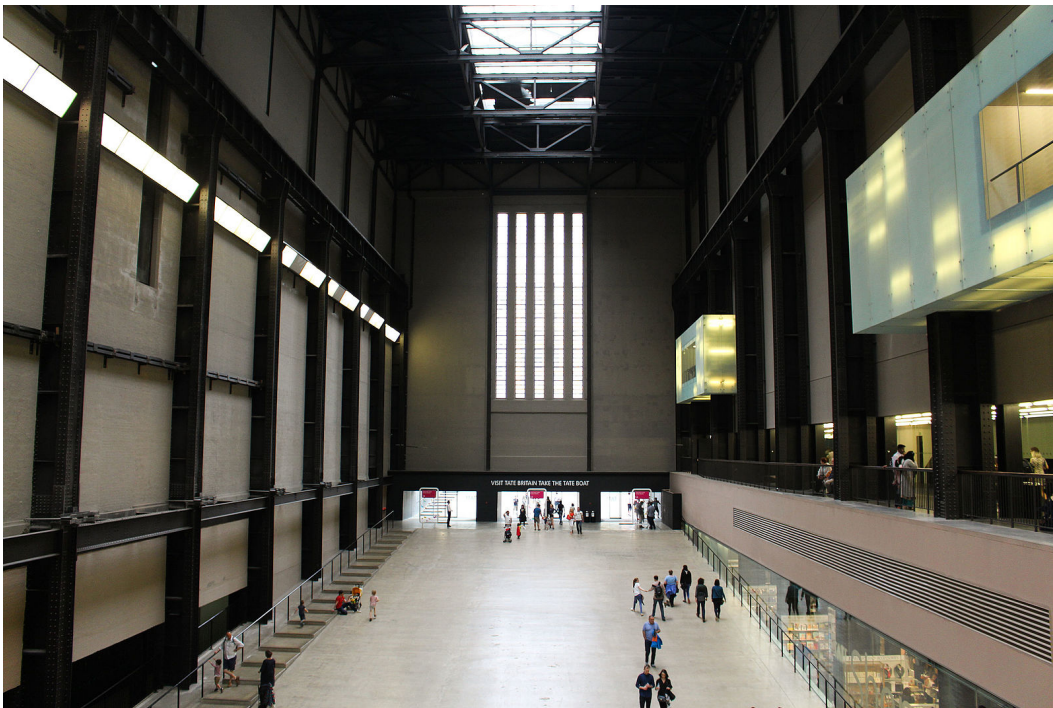


Figure 18. Turbine Hall's Tate Modern. The Wub, 2015.

The collective spectatorship produced by the art object has the potential to rival that of the spectacle, yet as agents of community formation, these two typologies are distinct. Their biggest difference lies in the art object acting as a greater mediator between the agency of the artist and the spectator – especially compared to the everyday mass spectacles of post-revolution Russia, the art object often inhabits an abstract realm. Unlike Meyerhold’s theater, which allowed the artist-director to discriminately transfer his words, ideas, and directions to the audience through a complete control over actors and stage, the art object must communicate in the language of form, scale, and materiality. This abstraction diminishes the authority of the artist in the work, allowing for more room in interpretation – and, as a consequence, subjectivity – on the part of the recipient.

An important consideration in determining whether artworks embody Agamben’s “outside” is their unavoidable characterization by the physical space they inhabit – while not exclusively the case, the most visible and notable art objects are located in gallery spaces. Is it possible for art galleries, as institutional spaces, to exist in the peripheries of the established order? Bishop thinks no – arguing that the gallery reinforces an elitist culture, she writes that “even if art engages with ‘real people’, this art is ultimately produced for, and consumed by, a middle-class gallery audience and wealthy collectors”¹⁰⁰. Bishop’s argument that gallery spaces are excluded from Agamben’s “outside” is compounded by the reality that, by their very nature, art galleries invoke a passive mode of reception. While the argument that the institutional space of art galleries caters to the upper class of society is irrefutable, the Tate Modern was chosen as a case study because of its unique nature as an exhibition space. The building’s history as a power plant, and consequent formal qualities, separate it from the convention of its type of institutional spaces – the Turbine Hall, the exhibition space of *Marsyas* and *Test Sites*, is a massive

¹⁰⁰ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 37.

industrial space with the capacity to hold hundreds. Further, entry to the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall is free and the gallery is the most widely visited in the United Kingdom. While it is not a guarantee that the communities of visitors to Tate Modern's Turbine Hall will experience a space that exists outside of mainstream society, they will certainly experience one outside the tradition of a gallery space.



Figure 19. Marsyas. Tate Modern, 2002.

Test Sites and *Marsyas* as art objects are the embodiment of an artist's attempt to redefine or challenge traditional notions of gallery space. Both part of Tate Modern's Unilever Series, the works were chosen for their capacity to cause participants to question the space which they inhabit, the relationship with the work, and with each other. The following juxtaposition is derived from an analysis of visual documentation of the objects, and the writing of the artist and critics. These forms of representation are understood to be limited, and that an in-person relation

with the work may have produced different conclusions. The object's form, symbolism, and characteristic of the experience it provides are the characteristics that will be considered in the following analysis.

Kapoor's *Marsyas*, on display from October 2002 to April 2003, was a massive PVC sheet suspended between three steel rings that stretched the length of the Turbine Hall (fig. 19). It is not a synthesis of artforms, but a singular sculptural object, and yet the atmosphere created by *Marsyas* is undoubtedly total. The organic, membrane-like quality of the sculpture contrasted greatly with the industrial architecture of the gallery – through this opposition and its imposing scale, the work fills the Turbine Hall with a commanding atmospheric presence. While engagement with *Marsyas* remains primarily observational, the environment created by the structure binds together its audience leaving them with no choice but to experience the space not as individuals but as one mass collective. Individual relationships between spectator and object are nevertheless preserved: due to the



Figure 20. *Marsyas*. Tate Modern, 2002.

object's size, visitors to the Turbine Hall are met with a unique face of the object whether they observe it from the ground floor or an upper level. On two occasions – February 7th and 8th – *Marsyas* was activated as an event space for the performance of *Lamentate*, an orchestral work inspired by the sculpture as well as a political performance against the Iraq War by Peter Sellars. Primarily, however, the object created an abstract stage of communal spectatorship, a break from an established reality in its unique otherworldliness.

Compared to *Marsyas*, the physical presence of Höller's *Test Sites* is not nearly as grand, dominating, or prescriptive in its effects. Exhibited between October 2006 and April 2007, *Test Sites* is composed of five spiraling slides running from the upper floors of the Turbine Hall to its ground level that redefined the space not as a container for artworks and their spectators, but an environment of play (fig. 21). Indeed, a design structured around play was an active desire of Höller, who characterized the act of sliding – the ritual practice central to his experiential work – through Caillois' concept of *ilinx*. The process of hurtling down the stainless-steel slide must certainly have been an exhilarating affair, and was made a visible spectacle through the clear acrylic cover of the slides. Rather than producing a singular collective, *Test Sites* creates communal microcosms within the Turbine Hall. There is the community of gallery attendants anxiously waiting in line for their turn to slide, the disoriented assemblage of the recently ejected, the subjects in the process of sliding, and the spectators gawking at their descent. Perhaps to an even greater degree than Caillois' theory of play, Höller's work can be characterized through Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque. The affinity of the environment created by *Test Sites* to that of a carnival atmosphere is both literal: attendants queuing for rides who fill the gallery space with excited shrieks once they get their turn; and symbolic: demonstrating the possibility of a temporary



Figure 21. Test Sites. Tate Modern, 2006.

liberation from a hierarchical structure. Intoxicating and child-like, the process is a pronounced departure from the expected conduct of institutionalized space. While Kapoor challenges spectator's perception through the total atmosphere he creates by proxy of *Marsyas*, Höller disrupts the very convention of gallery space behavior.

The most perceptible distinction between Kapoor's *Marsyas* and Höller's *Test Sites* is the work's formal qualities: it is the difference of an art object that is situated in the abstract as opposed to the everyday. *Marsyas* is not a common or recognizable form, it is not one that can be naturally found outside of Kapoor's intervention in the Turbine Hall. The object's elongated openings may call to mind the horn of a brass instrument, but its membrane-like skin subverts any relation of the work to a product of our material reality. The otherworldly scale of *Marsyas* only compounds to its abstraction – the sculpture is so massive that it is impossible to see it in its totality, leaving spectators with a fragmented understanding of the object whose presence so forcefully affects them. The existence of *Marsyas* as an illusion was purposeful on the part of the artist: Kapoor writes that “the work must maintain its mystery and never reveal its plan. [...] I want to make things that remain secret”¹⁰¹. In theory, an artwork in the state of such abstraction ceases to transfer any influence of its creator – the totality constructed is not of the artist, but of the object. Yet *Marsyas* is not immersed fully in the realm of nonobjectivity: audiences receive hints of Kapoor's directive through the symbolism of the sculpture's bright red color, skin-like materiality, and – most importantly – its title.

Kapoor's sculptural object borrows its title, and accompanying symbolic associations, from a figure in Greek mythology. Marsyas was the name of a satyr who challenged the god Apollo to a contest of musical skill and, after losing by the judgment of the goddesses of music, was skinned alive as punishment for his arrogance. Scholarship tends to associate Kapoor's sculpture to Titian's *The*

¹⁰¹ Kapoor, “Anish Kapoor.”

Flaying of Marsyas – just as the massive art object imposes a forced spectatorship onto visitors of the Turbine Hall, the Italian Renaissance artist presents the flaying of the satyr as a public spectacle. Restrained by shock, the audience is unable to turn away. The abstract nature of *Marsyas* limits the object’s ability to formally divulge the artist’s intent, yet a symbolic analysis of the work quickly reveals an embodied hubris. Kapoor, in his creation of the largest sculpture displayed at the Tate Modern to date, challenged traditional notions of the physical limits of an art object. The artist wrote that “the work forms itself”, yet this is not entirely true – even in its abstract totality, *Marsyas* is the materialized symbol of a contest between Kapoor and the established order¹⁰².



Figure 22. *Flaying of Marsyas*. Titian, 1570 -1576.

¹⁰² Kapoor.

Höller's *Test Sites* is not some foreign artifact born from the mind of the artist, but the embodiment of a formal typology commonplace in our material reality. Slides are a form instantly recognizable to any visitor to the Turbine Hall, and the accompanying familiarity of their ritual use played an integral part in transforming the gallery into a play space. Höller did nothing to subvert audience associations: an adverse or authoritarian effect might have been produced if *Test Sites* was an unusable accessory, but the slides function exactly as they would if installed in a playground. Höller's strategy of borrowing an everyday form is the antithesis of Kapoor's construction of an alien object, yet it produces the same effect of mitigating the influence of the artist. While Höller maintained an agency in designing the specificities of each slide and choosing their layout in the gallery, Windsor argues that "he was in the position of a patient, so far as he adopted a pre-existing design to determine the outcome of the work"¹⁰³. It is not an object of a separate, abstract reality – secret in its intention and design – but one that is defined by an accepted everyday function. Windsor continues by arguing that this formal familiarity establishes a democratized understanding of the process that make up *Test Sites*: "[the object] also disintegrates symbolically the barriers held up in many contemporary art institutions that exclude all except an elite few on the basis of their not being able to understand, or not being qualified to do so"¹⁰⁴. Höller's work through form alone challenges Bishop's notion of the gallery space as an elite institution – as in Bakhtin's carnival, visitors of *Test Sites* interact with the work equally, free of the hierarchical distinctions of an established order. This is where the work gets its separate and free character that subscribes to Agamben's definition of an "outside": not only from the associations it produces, but the environment of temporary liberation crafted by its formal familiarity.

¹⁰³ Windsor, "Art of Interaction."

¹⁰⁴ Windsor.



Figure 23. Test Sites. Tate Modern, 2006.



Figure 24. Test Sites. Tate Modern, 2006.

While it is true that *Test Sites* gave gallery attendants an operational role in the production of the artwork compared to the passive spectatorship of *Marsyas*, the mass spectacles of Soviet totalitarianism exemplified that collective production does not guarantee criticality or agency on the part of the individual. Rather their dichotomy exists in that *Test Sites*, unlike *Marsyas*, gives audiences a choice in how they interact with the work. This element of individuality within the broader collective was the missing element in the case study of Russia's communal production – the distinction between a democratic process, and one that is much more uniform. Spectatorship of *Test Sites* does not come with the requirement of participation – Windsor writes that “Höller affects people to slide via the slides but only if they choose”¹⁰⁵. Sure, once a visitor has entered the slide they are past the point of no return – becoming solely a body, steered by Höller through his design of the work – but it takes the complete agency of the visitor to make this choice (fig. 23). In *Marsyas*, visitors to the Tate Modern are caught in Kapoor's conflict against their will. They are subjected to the bright-red, flayed skin of the satyr Marsyas from the moment they step into the Turbine Hall, and are unable to escape its effects until they exit the space. While Höller invites gallery attendants to be disoriented and destabilized – torn out of their everyday experience as they are hurled through his slides – the choice to undergo this temporary dissolution always remains at the agency of the subject.

¹⁰⁵ Windsor.

Implementing Totality

The Common presents [?] [?] [?]

On the day of its opening, a visitor entering *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] may have been struck with the notion that they had not been able to find the correct gallery. They were in the right place though – the Lucas Gallery at 185 Nassau Street, an exhibition space composed of a long passage to an interior room, white walls and hardwood floors. The potential disorientation of visitors would have emerged from the fact that the entrance hall of the visual arts exhibition was void of any artistic production; the only indication of intervention in the space were the words – ‘THE COMMON PRESENTS’ – warped as if scanned by an impatient child and followed by three uniform instances of the unicode character [?], meaning ‘yet to come’. Separating the passageway and inner room hung a pair of dark blue satin curtains, drawn upon for the duration of the exhibition as an invitation for spectators to venture into the gallery. The entrance hall was a space of unfulfilled potential – a threshold between *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] and exterior, everyday reality – a stage in perpetual anticipation of the actors it would come into contact with.

Upon passing through the curtains into the center of the exhibition space, one encountered a saturation in stark contrast to the emptiness of the entrance hall. At times the saturation was created by a social totality of audience interrelation – subjects filling the Lucas Gallery with conversation, music, and dance — at others, it was produced by the sole presence of artistic object. The center of the room was dominated by a machine-apparatus. A 6 ft × 4 ft sheet of clear acrylic was raised about a foot off the ground by a steel frame and plywood base, which extended

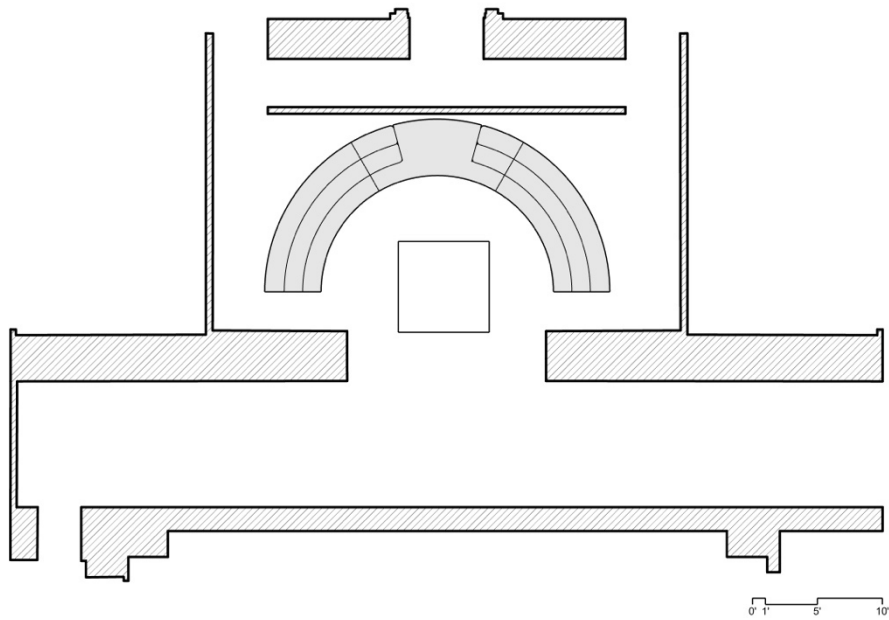


Figure 25. *The Lucas Gallery during The Commons Presents* [?] [?] [?]. Petr Karpov, 2024.

outwards to make an ideal square – 8 ft on each side. Underneath the acrylic sheet was suspended an Epson v850 – a flatbed document scanner found in most offices – attached to an xy plotter that allowed it to move across the entire area of the acrylic. A clutter of mechanical elements – keyboards, fans, electrical instruments, and tangle of wires and chords – ran from the plotter to a pair of computers sitting on the floor in front of the machine-apparatus. At their center, an LED display reading ‘PRESS BUTTON TO START SCAN ^^’ was attached to a raspberry pi, a few additional wires, and the promised button. Upon pushing the button, the programmed ritual of the machine-apparatus would begin: the document scanner started up with a flash – its light dancing across the acrylic – and the plotter supporting it would creak as it began making its path along the sheet. After five and a half minutes and 20 individual operations, the scanner-plotter would produce a



Figure 26. The Common presents [?] [?] [?]. Petr Karpov, 2024

full 5 ft × 4 ft scan (fig. 27). At its completion, the scan would appear as a projection on the far wall of the gallery and remain on display until the next subject underwent the same process.

The scanner-plotter did not act alone: surrounding the object in a semicircle – shaping the space and audience of the exhibition – stood an arena. The plywood structure was composed of a three-tier system – the first bench two feet off the ground and the others two feet above the one below it, rising to a height of six feet – held up by regularly spaced legs. The standardized pieces of the legs and seats were attached with angle brackets and constructed into three modules. The design of the modules allowed assembly in a number of variations to create staged environments for different uses. While the two end pieces were identical, the one at the center of the structure – in the space below the projected scans – extended the bottom tier back to create a partial stage. Throughout the course of *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?], the arena manifested different uses and audiences. During the exhibition’s opening, the structure provided amphitheater seating for assembled spectators, but – just several days prior – the side modules had been used as dancing platforms while the central stage became a DJ booth. This formlessness, brought on by a continuous transformation, was a core tenet of the exhibition’s design. With each day, as more subjects turned their bodies into digital scans, select curations were printed out at 1:1 scale and began to fill in the entrance hall that had previously been a void of potential. Thus, the stage was reunited with the actors that had used it: the fragmented bodies on display representing the mediums, the methodologies, and the communities of *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?].

Previous chapters of the thesis have demonstrated that contemporary case studies of totality cannot be defined by a Wagnerian tradition and have proposed a new model of totality that is relational, playful, and in opposition to established form. Yet an understanding born from the analysis of other’s work – case studies



Figure 27. Untitled Scan. Luke Shannon, 2024.



Figure 28. Untitled Scan. Petr Karpov, 2024.

which grant me only limited knowledge of the artist's intention – is cursed to remain partial. Through researching the topic of this thesis, it became evident that a solely theoretical approach only goes so far toward developing a modern understanding of totality – there arose a need for a practical application and testing of the proposed theory. I was presented with a rare and effective opportunity to achieve this objective: as a senior in Princeton University's visual arts department, a requirement for the fulfillment of the certificate program is the exhibition of a body of work. This materialized as *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]* – a collaborative thesis show between myself and Luke Shannon on display from March 25th to April 5th of this year. The exhibition was a construction of an arena, a scanner, and a series of performances, in which members of the audience alternated between spectator and actor, player and plotter, artist and artwork, and were invited to create additional roles of their liking. This chapter builds a theory from the methodology and mediums exhibited in *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]* – it is the study of totality as ritual, as object, and as communal experience.



Figure 29. *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]*. Petr Karpov, 2024

Process and References

In the months leading up to the exhibition, a colleague in the visual arts program told me a story of a large, abandoned field near her childhood home in St. Louis. Plagued by patches of overgrown grass and a creek running through its center, it didn't seem that any of the surrounding houses held jurisdiction over the empty lot. Seeing the potential of the space, kids from her neighborhood began invading the field – setting up games of soccer, kickball, or capture-the-flag and marking their presence with leftover balls, discarded toys, and trash cans repurposed as goal posts. The play space was the realization of an agenda-less collective, and eventually became known as 'the common'. Similarly to an abandoned lot in suburban St. Louis, *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]* is the construction of communal objects and space. The exhibition can be broken into two parts: *[?] [?] [?]* is the title of the scanner-plotter designed by Luke at the center of the gallery and *The Common* is the arena structure that presents it, acting as a sculptor of space and spectatorship. The functional objects are not limited to their physical form, but defined by their communal use: the scanner-plotter allows for the creation of artworks through collective production, while *The Common* is able to adapt to the various needs of its audiences. While Luke and I at times served as the directors or designers of the theater of *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]*, we were never its sole authors – as an embodiment of a collective methodology, the exhibition was created by each subject that entered the space. The design process of *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]* is ongoing, and the afterlives of the objects displayed in the exhibition will be determined by their future interactions with audiences, artists, and authors.

As references for *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]*, I prioritized studying artworks which altered the perception and context of the space they inhabited. I

developed an understanding that a work could construct this relationship between spaces and audiences in one of two ways: the first is a work's atmospheric production. This approach – more conventionally associated with Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk – prioritizes the creation of an environmental transformation targeting spectators' senses. Through the formal qualities of scale, materiality, sound, and light, these artworks have the potential to orchestrate an atmosphere outside of the traditional spectator experience and transform the spatial context they reside in. Atmospheric production is the approach exhibited in Wagner's design of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus: by separating an audience from his stage with a dark abyss, Wagner theorized this estrangement to enhance the mythical quality of his operas (fig. 30)¹⁰⁶. Koss, however, identifies the architecture of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus as “the essential authoritarianism of Wagner”¹⁰⁷. Arguing that the



Figure 30. Premiere of *Götterdämmerung*. 1876.

¹⁰⁶ Dähne, Hoekstra, and Ruhl, *The Death and Life of the Total Work of Art*, 14.

¹⁰⁷ Koss, *Modernism after Wagner*, 253.

mysticism the composer produced heightened his control over audiences, Koss writes that “by hiding the conductor and orchestra under the stage, Wagner prevented spectators from seeing – and therefore, from understanding – how the Gesamtkunstwerk was being constructed”¹⁰⁸. This case study shows that although the atmosphere created by Wagner is powerful in its totality, it only gains this potential through a deception of spectators. The architecture of Bayreuth Festspielhaus became a warning, and led to a design of *The Common presents* [?] [?] that prioritized openness and clarity, producing an understanding of the work by the audiences that would interact with it.

The other theorized method of work’s role in spatial transformation was derived from Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics: one that prioritizes communal creation and social engagement over passive observation. These artworks are largely ephemeral, consisting exclusively of the presence and interaction between actors and spectators – and many times only between members of the audience. As the art in such instances is both produced and received in the gallery, it transforms the perception of the space from a passive backdrop to an active participant in the creation of the work. It does not need to be limited to the gallery, however: relational artworks produced in public spaces entice the material reality of the everyday to join their aesthetic production, transforming mundane environments into artistic works. While these two strategies – atmospheric production and relational aesthetics – can greatly recontextualize a work’s exhibition space, it is when they are employed by an artist in tandem that an artwork truly takes on a transformative aesthetic.

The works discussed in the previous chapter – Anish Kapoor’s *Marsyas* and Carsten Höller’s *Test Sites* – provide case studies of the different strategies used by artists to shape space. A juxtaposition of their exhibition at the Turbine Hall of the

¹⁰⁸ Koss, 253.

Tate Modern reveal works that manifest the varying principles of atmospheric production and social interrelation. Kapoor's *Marsyas* is able to create a total atmosphere simply through its formal characteristics: the sculpture's immense scale binds audiences together, while the opposition of the object's organic membrane with the industrial setting of the Turbine Hall redefines the gallery space. Yet the environment that Kapoor designs risks accusations of authoritarianism in the same manner as Wagner's Bayreuth Festspielhaus: with an abstraction obscuring its construction, *Marsyas* creates an atmosphere that deceives audiences. Carsten Höller's *Test Sites*, on the other hand, is the study of an object derived from the commonplace. In choosing a form with an understood everyday use, Höller facilitates an interaction with the work that is indiscriminate amongst audiences. *Test Sites* is likewise a model of Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics: although the objects may stand alone as sculptural works, they are best defined by their produced realm of play and social engagement. In this manner, *Test Sites* manifests the strategies of both atmospheric production and relational aesthetics, redefining the Turbine Hall as not merely a container of objects and audiences, but an environment shaped by subject relation.



Figure 31. Carsten Höller. *Gagosian*, 2013.

Beyond its ability to transform space, *Test Sites* was a valuable reference for the production of *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]* as a work that was designed to be a social experiment. Bourriaud comments on this aspect of Höller's practice, identifying him as an artist that "applies his high-level scientific training to the invention of situations and objects which involve human behaviour" (fig. 31)¹⁰⁹. While quasi-scientific at best, the importance of *Test Sites* as a case study of social inquiry is that – as is the case with all experiments – it had no predetermined outcome. Höller may have had theories to the effects that his formal intervention would produce, but until *Test Sites* was installed at the Turbine Hall and made its first contact with gallery attendants, his hypothesis remained in the realm of speculation. I adopted this same methodology in designing *The Common* as a social experiment. Despite my ambition to create an object that produced atmosphere effects and facilitated audience participation, upon its construction the work would ultimately gain an agency that was its own. *The Common* would not be determined

¹⁰⁹ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 16.

by theory that birthed it – from this realization arose a commitment to accept any outcome that may arise from it, even one that may go against the developing theory of social totality.

The form of *The Common* is a derivative of Rita McBride’s *Arena* – remixed to accommodate the spatial and relational requirements of a Princeton University visual arts exhibition. Currently on display at Dia Beacon, *Arena* was originally designed by McBride in 1997 and has spent the past 26 years accommodating a range of spaces, audiences, and performances. While described by Dia Beacon as a sculpture, *Arena* defies conventional form: it is not only a sculpture, but an object, a functioning architecture, and a modern theater space¹¹⁰. A 13 ft × 13 ft tribune characterized by its modular geometric framework, *Arena* was conceived by McBride as “an ongoing investigation into the ways public institutional space, art, and audiences interact”¹¹¹. With this conceiving ambition, *Arena* is likewise the architect of a realm of intersubjective relations – embodying Bourriaud’s theory of relational aesthetics. McBride’s work is both a physical framework and a social environment, fostering active interactions between subjects that one would be hard pressed to find in the other galleries of Dia Beacon. McBride describes the social totality created through *Arena* in a 2023 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, accentuating “how incredibly dynamic the democratic structure gets with bodies – without them, it’s just a lot of hot air”¹¹². Both *Arena* and the gallery space it occupies come to life when the work is activated by the presence of an audience. This manifestation of a social totality is most evident during moments of *Momentum*, a series of events collectively programmed by Rita McBride,

¹¹⁰ “Rita McBride: Arena Momentum.”

¹¹¹ “Rita McBride: Arena Momentum.”

¹¹² Obrist, *New Functions for Old Narratives: An Interview with Rita McBride*.



Figure 32. Rita McBride Arena. Dia Arts Foundation, 2023.

choreographer Alexandra Waierstall, and performance collective discoteca flaming star¹¹³. *Momentum* produces an ephemeral community of free, equal contact between actors and audiences: dancers would occupy spots directly on the structure, moving around or over spectators, and – if they had the inclination to do so – all it would take for a spectator to become a performer was to stand up and dance, as well.

The influence that *Arena* has on audience and space is powerfully seductive: its amphitheater-like form draws spectators inward and upward, making it virtually irresistible to scale the sculpture. However, the crafted effect is distinct from the one manifested by the work of Wagner, defined by Koss as “artistic environment or performance in which spectators are expertly maneuvered into dumbfounded passivity by a sinister and powerful creative force”¹¹⁴. While the Wagnerian totality produced at Bayreuth Festspielhaus is one of mystique – keeping spectators both literally and figuratively in the dark – Rita McBride’s *Arena* impresses audiences through its openness. There is no attempt to conceal its formal workings, its structure, or its construction: with the clarity of all these elements at its forefront, the work is both literally and figuratively permeable. By adapting the common, everyday form of bleachers, Rita McBride allows audiences to immediately grasp her architectural and conceptual intentions. This measure does nothing to reduce the effect of *Arena* on spectators, but – by equipping audiences with a full understanding of the work – allows them to be dumbfounded by an agency that is only their own.

¹¹³ “Rita McBride: Arena Momentum.”

¹¹⁴ Koss, *Modernism after Wagner*, 11.



Figure 33. Rita McBride Arena. Dia Arts Foundation, 2023.

Arena strives for radical openness not only in its medium but in its methodology. In her interview with Obrist, McBride accentuates her practice’s emphasis on a democratization of artistic exchange, saying “I’m particularly interested in not owning my work at all because I find it so limiting. I love the design world because it’s not about this one idea of authorship”¹¹⁵. This commitment is materialized in *Momentum Manifesto* – a body-sized poster designed by David Reinfurt which was exhibited alongside *Arena* at Dia Beacon and acts as a manual of the work’s component parts. Like the ingredient list of a cookbook, *Momentum Manifesto* is an open invitation for audiences to reproduce McBride’s structure. Upon becoming a part of the Dia Art Foundation collection, both McBride’s *Arena* and Reinfurt’s *Momentum Manifesto* were transitioned into

¹¹⁵ Obrist, *New Functions for Old Narratives: An Interview with Rita McBride*.

a copyleft license, and made freely available to the public in perpetuity¹¹⁶. A radical move towards the democratization of artistic production, the freedoms of a copyleft are as follows:

- Freedom 0 – the freedom to use the work.
- Freedom 1 – the freedom to study the work.
- Freedom 2 – the freedom to copy and share the work with others.
- Freedom 3 – the freedom to modify the work, and the freedom to distribute modified and therefore derivative works.

During the design process of *The Common*, Freedom 1 and Freedom 3 of the *Arena* copyleft license were exploited to maximum effect. Not only did this encompass a study of the digital forms of McBride's *Arena*, but – having witnessed a performance during *Momentum* by discoteca flaming star – I was likewise able to analyze the relational aesthetics of the structure. As was the case with many other members of the audience, the social totality constructed by McBride at Dia Beacon had left an impression: the experience had motivated – if not outright birthed – my ambition to create a work with the potential to shape both space and audience. *The Common* is not an exact copy of *Arena*, yet any individual acquainted with McBride's work would feel its influence in the Lucas Gallery. In this way, a remix acts as a facilitator of associations: even entering the space for the first time, a subject with personal or formal familiarity with *Arena* would gain an automatic understanding of the desired use of *The Common*. This could manifest as a desire to climb to the structure's highest point, or – if they were lucky enough to witness a program of *Momentum* – an individual may understand the Lucas Gallery's

¹¹⁶ “Rita McBride: Arena Momentum.”

redefinition as a space for dance, performance, and spontaneous community. Yet – as previous chapters demonstrated – contemporary total works of art are not defined by their formal parameters, and even less so by their history. In being remixed and presented at an exhibition at Princeton University, the form of *Arena* took on a second life – constructing new communities, spaces, and subject relations. *The Common* is not defined as a formal derivative of McBride’s work, but by its past and future contact with audiences and effects.

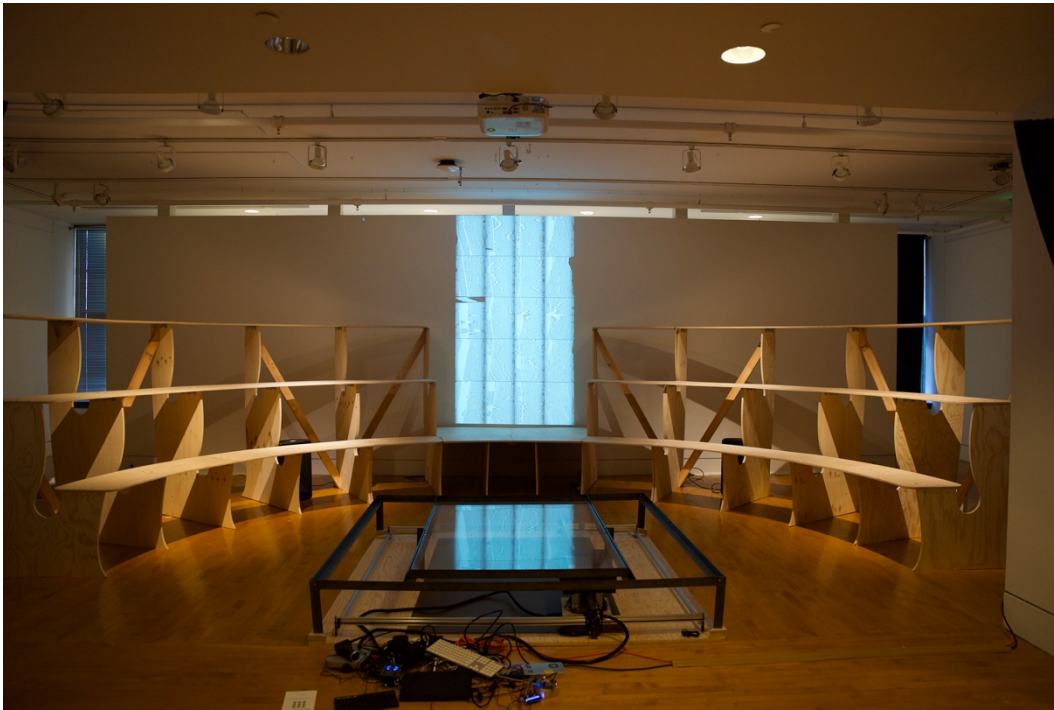


Figure 34. *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]*. Petr Karpov, 2024

The Theatrics of Space

Of all the arts, theater has historically been especially affiliated with the notion of totality – Juliet Koss’ *Modernism after Wagner* argues that “theater would appear to be a code word for the very idea of artistic interrelation”¹¹⁷. Beyond artistic synthesis, theatricality and totality are tantamount in that both derive their significance from their ability to provoke an audience: the more theatrical an artwork is, likewise it is more total. Perhaps due to my ambition toward totality or the spectacle at the center of its production, during its creation, *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] began exhibiting the formal characteristics of a theater space. The visual arts exhibition features actors and spectators, distinct areas for stage and seating (these also fulfill the role of stage design), and even a curtain delineating the space for performance. As a modern spectacle, however, *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] represents a radical departure from the elements and roles at the core of theater productions, challenging the hierarchy of spectator and actor relationship and disrupting traditional theater space. It is a theater of the everyday – grounded in the shared reality and experience of all participants, equally – one in which spectator, actor, and stage inhabit the same space and, more importantly, lay equal claim to it.

The ambiguity of spatial classification in *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] was an applied tactic to move away from the traditional binary structure of stage and seating, and, as a consequence, actor and spectator. Koss comments on this nuance, writing that in the production of totality “the distinction between passive

¹¹⁷ Koss, *Modernism after Wagner*, 23.



Figure 35. *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]*. Petr Karpov, 2024

and active spectatorship, or between observation and participation, is not always so clear”¹¹⁸. While the plotter-scanner – in both form and function – is the most recognizable stage of the production, the gallery lights are instead focused on the structure of *The Common*, turning any spectator into the object of observation. During raves, *The Common* acted as both DJ booth and dancing platform, placing the performer and audience symbolically on the same level; physically, spectators could choose to be higher or lower. Outside of events, even in the absence of any physical spectators, *The Common* as an arena structure and the curtains central to the space impose a constant implied spectatorship on the entire gallery. The curtains – a device used in theater exclusively as a tool to hide the stage – remained drawn open for the duration of the show, acting as a symbol of the production’s transparency and frustrating classifications of the space. By introducing an

¹¹⁸ Koss, 255.

ambiguity to the formal elements of a theater production, *The Common* creates an original space with roles outside the accepted binary: that of implied spectatorship, unwilling spectatorship, as well as both individual and collective spectatorship.

Of the many attempts at creating a theater of totality, perhaps the most thorough and documented is that of the Bauhaus authors. In *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, Moholy-Nagy makes such a proposal for a total theater space – one in which the synthesis of stage and man will revive the miraculous¹¹⁹. In the following excerpt Moholy-Nagy expands on the means of realizing his proposed totality:

“There would be a further enrichment if the present isolation of the stage could be eliminated. In today's theater, stage and spectator are too much separated, too obviously divided into active and passive, to be able to produce creative relationships and reciprocal tensions. It is time to produce a kind of stage activity which will no longer permit the masses to be silent spectators, which will not only excite them inwardly but will let them take hold and participate”

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For Moholy-Nagy, totality is achieved when stage and spectator are brought together, however, the separation of these two entities is greatly magnified, if not outright produced, through Moholy-Nagy's continued encouragement. By making the distinction between “active stage” and “passive spectator”, the Bauhaus pedagogy delegates the stage to exist in abstract space while subordinating man – as both actor and spectator – to natural laws. From this acceptance of the stage existing in an inherently separate reality from the audience, all of the Bauhaus efforts are then directed to bring the masses closer to this abstract stage – toward

¹¹⁹ Schlemmer et al., *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, 53.

¹²⁰ Schlemmer et al., 67.

participatory, active spectatorship. However, in a search for a stage activity that “will not only excite [spectators] inwardly, but let them take hold” abstract, imaginary space can hardly be expected to yield results: it is inconceivable to “take hold” of what is not real.

Perhaps due to theater’s historical inclination toward fantasy, no consideration is given by Moholy-Nagy to a theatrical totality existing in the natural sphere of man. The production of *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] is built off such an assumption: a theater in which spectator, actor, and stage inhabit the same space and, more importantly, lay equal claim to it. The ability of the subject to fluidly switch roles – and the ease with which one may move from stage to seating – make for a space in the constant process of indiscriminate evolution. *The Common* allows for the chance and chaos inherent to the everyday to replace the carefully fabricated fantasy of Moholy-Nagy’s miraculous spectacle. Rather than simply omitting the fantastical and abstract, *The Common* actively expunges it: like the ingredient list of a recipe, the exhibition guide of *The Common* lists precisely each element that went into its design and fabrication. This deliberate transparency allows for a democratized understanding of the processes constituting *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?], in theory giving any spectator the ability to reconstruct it in full. Evident in the unassigned and unrestricted individual roles and the resulting collective artworks produced by the *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?], the elimination of the abstract in favor of the everyday has the potential to create a new, social totality that shatters the borders between spectator and stage.

Just as the everyday is unceasing, during its two-week showing, *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] remained in continuous production, open at every hour to allow for subjects to scan and for groups to stage performances, which included a jazz concert, an acapella group practice, yoga sessions, raves, mindful dinner, and



Figure 36. The Common presents [?] [?] [?]. Petr Karpov, 2024

simply sleeping for a night. In describing the total work of art as both the work and its effects on the audiences, Koss writes that the model of the total work of art presents both “artistic production and aesthetic reception”¹²¹. The incessant nature of the exhibition produced an assemblage of effects, not limited in reception to the space of the Lucas Gallery or visitors of the show. Many of the effects were not premeditated but were generated naturally from the creation of the artwork: entering the space, one of the first noticeable impressions is the smell of plywood – a consequence of the structure’s construction and installation in the gallery. Extending past the border of the gallery, music from the raves, musicians, and singers hosted by *The Common*, could be heard throughout the entirety of the building that housed it (fig. 36). This overflow was not only limited to sound, but also physical bodies: in an attempt to find quiet outside the event space, members of the acapella group rehearsing in their separate vocal groups and drained rave-goers could at times be found in the halls and classrooms of 185 Nassau Street. In the furthest encroachment, the structural components of *The Common* – scanned and distorted before becoming the backdrop of posters promoting the events held in the space – were plastered on lampposts and bulletin boards across the university campus. Unwittingly, the attempts of *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] to exist in the everyday had turned into a full-scale invasion.

Rather than a space with the singular purpose of crafting spectatorship, *The Common* was conceived of as a two-way channel – an artwork that likewise documented and displayed the effects that audiences had on the space. These effects are most obvious in the physical realm: with each event and performance, scuffs, chips, and footprints would spread across the malleable plywood surfaces of *The Common*. Not seen as destructive or incidental, these physical alterations represent

¹²¹ Koss, *Modernism after Wagner*.

the traces of community and remnants of the gatherings hosted in the space. Beyond the tangible imprints, each diverse use – dance performed, conversation held, or song belted – added to the structures’ collective memory. The work is contained not only within the patterns and impressions of its surface, but lives in the spaces and atmospheres between audience and effects. By becoming at times, a rave space, a play space, a stage, *The Common* inevitably assumed the associations of each function in the minds of its users, evolving both its essence and the subject’s continuous interactions with the space (fig. 36). In future lives and consecutive constructions – especially in the case of a reunion with a past user – *The Common* maintains its accumulations of audience impacts and associations, both tangible and not.



Figure 37. *Luke Sleeping*. Petr Karpov, 2024

The Machine Creating Totality and Ritual

In the theater of *The Common*, the only constant actor is [?] [?] [?] – the scanner-plotter. Getting its name from the unicode replacement character that represents a symbol that is ‘yet to come’, the machine-apparatus mirrors its shape and likewise exists in perpetual anticipation of the unspecified subject to be scanned, and – in doing so – complete its function. The machine is constant in its programming: it follows the same path during the production of each scan, which is composed of 20 identical parts and takes five and a half minutes to complete. The object’s consistency provides a rigid structure for its interaction with subjects. Subjects may lay still and allow the light from the scanner to dance across their body or trick the machine – by following or avoiding the path of the scanner – and in doing so, produce an intentionally fragmented and distorted representation of objective reality. Out of these individual moments of contact between subject and machine is born a mosaic that represents a separate digital reality, that is both a reflection and distortion of the physical reality that created it.

From the onset of this thesis project, Luke and I spoke of the scanner-plotter as a portal. It is a portal that utilizes the mundane (a document scanner found in any office building) to transform the mundane (some of the most interesting scans emerged from the capture of water bottles, wood blocks, and keyboards) into something extraordinary: fragmented, distorted, uncanny, or grotesque. The most commonly recorded use of the apparatus reflected its association to a gateway or portal: subjects would press their face up to the acrylic sheet covering the scanner in an attempt to get as close to the machine as possible. The distance between participant and machine remained insurmountable, but the attempt dramatized the scanner-plotter, forcing it to take on a role as a theatrical device in the production of *The Common*. Of the entire exhibition, the scanner-plotter was the only



Figure 38. Untitled Scan. 2024.

component that contained an element of the mystique and unknown: it is not possible to know the outcome of the scan – what was captured and what remained absent – until the completion of its use. This illusion was temporary, though, and continued use of the scanner-plotter gave the artist an increased ability to predict the outcome of the ritual production and, to some degree, enable to manipulate desired aesthetic outcomes.

The scanner-plotter, in its mechanical contact with the subject, performs a unique type of bodily totality. By its very nature, the apparatus fragments the body into parts or aspects that fit within its 8.5×11” flatbed. Even when the consequent images are stitched together, the product – in a paradoxical ambition for totality – highlights the absence of the whole. By displaying the resulting scan at a 1:1 scale, the body of the subject is split into a physical and digital self. The digital body exists totally outside of context, and detached from reality, as it floats in a black background. The incredibly high level of detail captured by the scanner allows for the body to be projected, displayed, and viewed at a massive scale: in these instances, the digital body becomes a hyperreal version of the original, moving even further outside of physical reality. The act of production of the scanner-plotter likewise embodies a fragmented totality. Divided into the product (the scanned image), the performance (the act of scanning), and the conception (the idea behind the scan), these processes are rarely totally – if at all – discernable in the production of the artwork.

The spectacle of the scanner-plotter – as a structured, symbolic process performed in a communal setting – was created to epitomize a ritual act. It is a modern ritual of transformation, of becoming, in which the physical becomes digital, the individual becomes a part of the collective, and the mundane becomes

fascinating. Victor Turner, in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, speaks to the significance of this liminal phase which subjects undergo during a metamorphic ritual. For Turner, it is a period of liberation from everyday structures, in which “entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial”¹²². The scanner-plotter treats each subject it comes into contact with indiscriminately: it strips them of any identities or roles they may hold outside the ritual context, allowing them for a short moment in time to exist solely as a body. Turner argues that this liminal period of freedom is a prerequisite of the restructuring of both individual and collective identities and norms – many times, perceiving faults necessitates a distance that the continuous participation in the everyday simply does not allow. The period of bodily stillness that the scanner-plotter demands allows for the ritualistic reflection and meditation at the core of Turner’s theory. It is a temporary liberation, of course, but the inevitable reclamation of their defining roles may leave subjects with a heightened understanding of their individual and communal identity. Turner’s theory of the transformative potential of rituals can be applied both practically – and symbolically – to the scanner-plotter as a total work of art. As the author explores the expression of liminality in societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions, one symbol emerges as especially pertinent: the duration of complete obstruction in a solar or lunar eclipse – the moment of totality¹²³.

A scan created by the scanner-plotter exists as a visual representation of the process used to create it; a collectively constructed scan, then, is both the product and depiction of communal artistic action. The work highlights the individuality of each contributor – from their physical body and its unique movements and

¹²² Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

¹²³ Turner, 95.



Figure 39. *Fragmented Body*. Luke Shannon, 2024.

expressions to their clothes, belongings, and accessories – while simultaneously synthesizing these into a cohesive, collective whole. The communal dynamics of the contributors is revealed through their captured relations with one another, the “mistakes” made during the scanning process, and even in the chronological order in which they chose to create the work. In rare instances, one or several members may direct the outcome of the collective artistic action, but in most cases the scanner-plotter records the democratized inputs and improvisations of each participant’s autonomy. Reinforcing community, the artwork’s digital existence is both documentation of and testament to the collective ritual performed. The emphasis, however, is not on the final product but the act of its creation and the interrelation, cooperation, and contentions that happen within those five minutes.

The ritual production at the center of *The Common* not only reaffirms existing communities, but actively creates new ones: once a subject is scanned – even if it is in total solitude – they instantly and inevitably join the community of every other individual who has undergone the process. It is a private, digital community that grew through the duration of the exhibition, with incorporated members who were generally not aware of the identity or inclusion of subsequent subjects. At the closing of *The Common presents [?] [?] [?]*, when the total body of work created by the scanner-plotter was projected as a slideshow and selected works displayed as prints, this secret community suddenly turned public. In this transitional moment, subjects in the physical audience were able to reunite with their digital selves and discover the identities of other members of this ritually-generated community – which, fragmented up to this point, was now whole.

Playing at Community

As the experience created by *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] moved increasingly in the direction of crafted spectatorship, greater totality, and a collectively centered model of production, the loss of a subject's individual autonomy became a growing concern. Evident in the proximity of totality to authoritarianism, the creation of an all-encompassing artwork – while aiming to unify an audience – risks erasing individual expression in favor of the collective identity. In *Reimagined Worlds: Narrative Placemaking for People, Play, and Purpose*, Margaret Kerrison explores the liberties and constraints of specially crafted spaces such as theme parks, shopping centers, and cinemas. In asking “how can you give your visitors a sense of play that encourages curiosity, exploration, and discovery and taps into their childlike self?”¹²⁴, Kerrison identifies a subject's agency to be the foremost factor in facilitating meaningful collaboration and personal expression. Following Kerrison's directive and in an attempt to escape totality's trend toward diminished personal freedom, *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] placed subject agency, as well as the qualities and consequences of play at the forefront of its experience.

While encouraging collaborative production was fundamental to the ethos of *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?], it became equally important to not enforce uniformity of experience or expression. This manifested as an effort to maintain subjects' autonomy by giving visitors the option to engage with the total work of art in any capacity they wished. In initial iterations, it was planned for subjects to receive instructions that guided them in the productions of their scans. Somewhere between Brian Eno's “Oblique Strategies” and the prophecy one might find within a fortune cookie, the prompts imparted commands such as ‘remain ambiguous’ or

¹²⁴ Kerrison, *Reimagined Worlds: Narrative Placemaking for People, Play, and Purpose*.

‘go down the wrong path’. Determined to be an additional, unnecessarily imposed structure, however, they were scrapped to allow for increased agency. Following their removal from the production process, understanding the operation of the scanner-plotter took either repetitive use or observation of others engaging in the ritual act. While this necessitated a bigger commitment on the part of subjects wishing to become creators, it allowed for those with less interest to be freed from the prescriptions of an enforced role.

It is of importance that Kerrison urges for a total environment to emulate a “sense of play”, as this is the same strategy expressed by Roger Caillois in *Man, Play, and Games*. While both play and totality are dominated by a rigid structure that governs subject’s activity and expression, the voluntary participation and free movement at the center of play acts as a mediator between individual autonomy and collective form. The interactive nature of the scanner-plotter and modular elements of *The Common* create personal, ever-changing interactions with the space, fostering subject curiosity and promoting physical and artistic exploration. Caillois writes that a defining component of play is its status as an uncertain activity, “the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player’s initiative”¹²⁵. *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] in its reliance of the everyday to structure subject’s experience embodies Caillois ideal: it was impossible to accurately predict the resulting artwork created by random interactions between spectators and the scanner-plotter and, with the many programs presented by the exhibition, the application of space one may encounter. Observing the diversity and intensity of play generated by the inherently functional objects of *The Common* and scanner-plotter raised the doubt of any definitive, formal difference between a toy and an apparatus, a structure and a play space. It would seem that as long as subjects

¹²⁵ Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 9.

were granted agency and the capacity for free exploration, in the collective mind any tool could be transformed into an actor in the production of play.

In a critique of the work, Jeff Whetstone likened *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] to a medical procedure while describing its similarity to Thomas Eakin's *The Agnew Clinic*. Eakin's painting does hold an uncanny resemblance to the production of *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] – both as a spectacle born out of spectatorship and a process of body fragmentation. Just as Eakin's medical students observing the surgeon's operation would soon take up the knife themselves, so too were the spectators of *The Common* learning the ritual of the scanner-plotter in preparation to undergo it themselves. Beginning as a study of the transformative potential of objects upon space and audience, *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?] yielded a totality with the ability to create novel roles, and consequently, novel communities.



Figure 40. *The Agnew Clinic*. Thomas Eakin, 1889.

Synthesizing Practice and Theory

utopia, yet to come is a thesis that redefines totality in the context of artistic production and reception, experience and effects. The narrative begins chronologically, with the theory of the Gesamtkunstwerk, introduced in 1849 by Wagner's *The Art-Work of the Future*. This totality is one of form, of methodology, and of the artist-director – while collectively received, it is produced through singular agency. Kapoor's *Marsyas* and Wagner's works are presented as case studies of this initial definition. The subject is introduced into a role as a creator of totality through the active spectatorship proposed by Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* and Caillois' *Man, Play, and Games*. With this repositioning, spectators become players and totality becomes participatory, no longer confined to artifacts born from the minds of geniuses or the forms of history. A move towards playfulness and formlessness is a move toward democratization: any subject is able to construct relational totality freely and equally. Tiravanija's exhibition at *Aperto 93*; Joseph, Parreno, and Perrin's *Les Ateliers du Paradise*; and Holler's *Test Sites* all present instances of a totality that is spontaneous, unproductive, and created through audience interrelation. Yet, through a study of Meyerhold's spectacle and his writing in *Meyerhold on Theatre*, a warning is presented of the potential of communally produced totalities succumbing to the homogenization of the collective. In such instances, while audiences are able to participate, the freedom to choose their form of participation is but an illusion – a difference between unity and uniformity in production and reception is established. Synthesizing the definition of a communal totality introduced by Agamben's *The Coming Community* with Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* presents a model for community formation that exists in the exterior of established forms and hierarchies, allowing participants to reclaim their agency and subjectivity. Based on the theoretical research of scholarship and case studies, the thesis defines the

following characteristics necessary for a utopian, social totality as proposed by Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk:

- Centering individual subject's agency
- Unproductive, uncertain, and spontaneous
- Existing in a reality exterior to that of the everyday
- Voluntary, equal, and free participation
- In the exterior of established forms or methods
- Defined by limits of time and space

This redefinition transforms a totality of the artist and the methodology, to a totality of the collective and community. From a totality of form and history, to a totality of spontaneous and free relation. In a practical manifestation, the thesis presents this definition as the totality of *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?]. Yet perhaps a synthesis of the theory and the practice is, in itself, a restriction to both. In *Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud argues that “what was yesterday regarded as formless or "informal" is no longer these things today”¹²⁶. Just as Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk practice is confined by his theory, if completing this thesis has taught me anything it is that defining anything as total – work, methodology, or practice – raises criticism.

I was first introduced to the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk by Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Ways of Curating*¹²⁷. The book explores the role of the curator in the contemporary art world, and – apart from prompting the topic of this thesis –

¹²⁶ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 8.

¹²⁷ Obrist, *Ways of Curating*.

played a significant part in the design of *The Common presents* [?] [?] [?]. The section that I remember most clearly is Obrist's description of *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk*, an exhibition curated by Harald Szeemann which Obrist writes was "the most important exhibition I saw during my adolescence, and one of the reasons I became a curator"¹²⁸. The exhibition featured a range of works from an incredibly diverse range of mediums and methods – Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*, Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* – yet all were defined by their totality. I was immediately intrigued by the term: it seemed to me that totality was an exploitation of the system, a definition understood to be synonymous with 'good art'. My introduction to the concept was also the first time it had disappointed me, however. Obrist concludes his description of *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* by stating that totality "can exist only in imagination: it can never actually be realized": it is from this that the exhibition gets its title, which translates to 'a tendency towards the total work of art'¹²⁹. It is a concept that exists only in its potentiality, gaining its beauty from an inability to be obtained.

To return to the question that introduced this thesis: is totality an effective term to describe its topic of study?

This thesis has shown that totality is an incredibly broad concept, used in definitions of collective aesthetic production and reception, social interrelation, community formation, and even the processes and spaces of play. Totality is a concept in the constant state of evolution, as it reflects the ideals and needs of contemporary artists, spectators, and the public in general. Whether Wagnerian, relational, social, or common, totality is a mirror of the current everyday, or the

¹²⁸ Obrist, 56.

¹²⁹ Obrist, 58.

desire to escape from it. Soon after the writing of this thesis, the development of new mediums and methodologies will make the proposed definition of totality obsolete. Perhaps it is better to not think of totality as a definition, but an ambition – it is from this idea that the thesis receives its title, *utopia, yet to come*. Translated from Greek, utopia means ‘no place’, and symbolizes the unfeasibility of defining totality through theory or practice.

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