

# Archaeologies of Contemporary Art: Negativity, Inoperativity, Désœuvrement

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## Abstract

In his recent writings, Giorgio Agamben develops an archaeology of contemporary art underwritten by his theory of inoperativity. In so doing, he returns to many of the questions raised in his very first book, *The Man Without Content*, notably revising his understanding of the readymade and the work of Marcel Duchamp. Exploring the difference between these analyses, this essay argues that a comparative analysis allows us to shed light on one of the most intricate aspects of Agamben's thought: the relation between negativity and inoperativity. It suggests that a constitutive ambivalence towards aesthetic negativity — oscillating between attraction and repulsion — is at the centre of the 'destruction of aesthetics' Agamben attempts in his first book. Reading his recent writings against this backdrop, it becomes evident that 'inoperativity' can be understood as a reworking of this problematic, resulting in an operation that undoes the stale opposition between dialectical negativity and Nietzschean affirmation. This perspective allows, then, for an exploration of the modality of privation at play in the 'in' of indifference and inoperativity. Privation, as it emerges in Agamben's poetics of inoperativity is a suspension of negativity, an indefinite privation that is irreducible to negation. In conclusion, it is argued that Agamben's concept of 'inoperativity' resonates with a variety of critical conceptual practices in contemporary art.

*Keywords: inoperativity, indifference, désœuvrement, negativity, passivity*



The first book Giorgio Agamben wrote, *The Man without Content*, published in 1970, has until very recently been the only one among his many works offering a detailed historico-philosophical analysis of contemporary art. Throughout Agamben's other works, references to 'visual' art do, of course, abound, but the thrust of these theoretical investigations is less concerned with its historical itinerary, let alone its contemporary place. More than four decades after his first book, Agamben recently returned to its subject, notably if mutedly revising his analysis of Duchamp and the readymade. In keeping with his methodological postulate that the contemporary can only be accessed indirectly, his 'Archaeology of the Work of Art' in *Creation and Anarchy* seeks to comprehend the present state

of the artwork by means of an archaeological investigation (Agamben, 2019a). The differences between these texts — separated as they are through the elaboration of Agamben’s philosophy of inoperativity — invite a comparative reading of the early work, not for the sake of comprehensiveness or the fiction of continuity, but to interrogate one of the most demanding aspects of his entire work: the relation between negativity and inoperativity.

There may be no aspect of Agamben’s work that is at once so important and so elusive, so frequently mentioned and yet so consistently misinterpreted as the stance it takes towards negativity. Throughout his work, and most explicitly in *Language and Death*, Agamben seems to advocate an abandonment of all forms of negativity and negation, up to and including its boundary figures, which he finds to be present in Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida (cf. Rauch, 2021). Even so, there may be no contemporary philosopher who has so often been accused of an utter ‘negativism’, if not outright nihilism. Among many others, Georges Didi-Huberman (2019; cf. 2009: chap. 3) considered it apt to criticise Agamben’s writings for a valorization of the negative, a reading or rather non-reading of Agamben’s actual engagement with the theme that is symptomatic for the general reception. A paradoxical constellation: the thinker who programatically made the call for an end to all negativity is confronted with the claim that even his own signal concepts are held captive by this very question. Yet readings such as Didi-Huberman’s are not only the result of carelessness, however striking their elisions may appear. On the contrary, they attest, even in spite of themselves, to the complex relation that Agamben’s work does indeed bear to the legacy of negative thought.

Its own genealogy bespeaks this ambivalence. For at the crucial moment Agamben positions inoperativity as the signal concept of the *Homo Sacer* project, he does so in a retracing of ‘*désœuvrement*’ in the debate between Alexandre Kojève and Georges Bataille, as well as its aftermath in Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy’s work (Agamben, 1998: 61–62). From Bataille’s ‘*negativité sans emploi*’ to Blanchot and Nancy’s use of ‘*désœuvrement*’ this entire debate has, of course, been marked by an abiding concern with negativity. So much so that Nancy even in his most recent work has continued to interrogate Blanchot’s thinking of the negative outside a dialectical economy (Nancy, 2016: 15–16). Agamben, for his part, was, from the beginning, careful to underscore that inoperativity can only be thought as a generic mode of potentiality, building on an earlier critique of Bataille’s attempt to think ‘beyond Hegelianism’ in a ‘negativity without employ’ (Agamben, 1991: 53, translation amended). But the markers of potentiality — the presence of an absence, the relation to privation — do introduce a certain

negative modality into the concept, evident not least in Agamben's vocabulary: be it *inoperativity*, *impotentiality*, *indifference*, *destitution* or *decreation* — privative prefixes are the signature of this philosophical idiom. In keeping with this tendency, Agamben's recent elaboration of art as resistance — with, but also against Deleuze — foregrounds a negative moment, that is to say, the constitutive role of 'not being and not doing' (2019b: 18). Far from valorising 'the' negative, the privative modality that surfaces here is irreducible to the stale opposition of dialectical negativity and Nietzschean affirmation, a by now historical dualism that, however, still furnishes the unquestioned matrix that orients and determines the divergent characterisations of Agamben's work.

The claim of the present essay is that Agamben's writings on art offer a privileged perspective from which to approach this strand in his work. For it is in his first book, *The Man Without Content*, that a certain ambivalence towards negativity emerges, to which inoperativity can be seen as a response. Even in his most recent writings, Agamben returns to this proximity. In the epilogue to *The Use of Bodies*, for instance, he evokes the 'practice of the avant-garde' as an attempt to 'actualize a destitution of work' (2016: 275), thus suggesting a parallel between avant-garde negativity and his project. Then, however, Agamben sharply delineates his own concept from their practice, which, he argues, 'ended up recreating in every place the museum apparatus and the powers that it pretended to depose' (2016: 275). In fact, this approximation and withdrawal vis-à-vis avant-garde negativity has a complex history in Agamben's work, originating in his very first work.

### **Terra aesthetica**

In the opening pages of *The Man Without Content*, Agamben declares himself in solidarity with Friedrich Nietzsche's radical critique of aesthetics as the framework for understanding art. According to Nietzsche and Agamben, 'aesthetics' denotes the distinctly modern, subjective and receptive understanding of art, exemplified, both claim, by Immanuel Kant's theory of reflective judgments and the notion of disinterested beauty to which it is linked. Against the aesthetic experience of art, Agamben evokes Plato's *damnatio* of the poets, which bears witness to an experience of art so different, so intense, so violent that it is bound to seem all but incomprehensible, even scandalous to a modern audience. The aesthetic appreciation of these modern spectators appears, in contrast, as anaesthetics: bleached-out, sanitised, apathetic. What seems like a contingent

fault of the contemporary audience, however, is in truth one element in an asymmetric relation, one side of a fracture that finds its counterpart in the terror and frenzy experienced by those artists the young Agamben held dear, most importantly perhaps Antonin Artaud, to whom he dedicated some of the essays pre-dating the book. They alone seem to have preserved a pre-aesthetic experience of art that makes Plato's condemnation comprehensible — a fragile privilege, or a privileged fragility, reflected, for instance, in the question Artaud posed to Jacques Rivière: 'Why lie, why try to put something which is life's very cry on a literary level?' (Artaud, 1968: 39).

Having diagnosed aesthetics as the cause and silencing of this cry, Agamben names its destruction as the explicit goal of his book: 'Perhaps nothing is more urgent — if we really want to engage the problem of art in our time — than a *destruction* of aesthetics that would, by clearing away what is usually taken for granted, allow us to bring into question the very meaning of aesthetics as the science of the work of art' (Agamben, 1999a: 6). The first thing to note here is that, in its general opposition to the aesthetic and its attempt to access an understanding of art outside of that framework, Agamben's approach is in keeping with a strategy common to thinkers as diverse as Heidegger, Derrida, Theodor W. Adorno and Alain Badiou, a tendency, that is to say, which could be described as dominant in Continental philosophy. The intention behind such 'anti-aesthetic' theories, notwithstanding their manifold differences, is the claim that aesthetics cannot provide the framework for understanding art, since the entire paradigm of 'the aesthetic' is constituted by exclusion, limitation, and closure. By that token, the destruction or overcoming of aesthetics turns into the precondition for disclosing a truth proper to art, however philosophically determined (unveiling, *poiēsis*, event etc.). These operations, we may note in passing, retain their own ambivalence, inasmuch as they frame the truth of art as irreducible to philosophy and yet as forming one of its complements, an epistemic exteriority that ultimately remains immanent to the discourse of philosophy. Art is that other, marginal, non-discursive form of knowledge in relation to which philosophy is always in a position of mastery.

In Agamben's case, the loss aesthetics attests to is keyed to a series of constitutive dualisms and fractures, most notably that between artist and aesthetic observer, which in turn unfolds as the split between creative principle and judgement, genius and taste. Throughout this critical assessment, the influence of Heidegger is readily discernible, but Agamben's effects an important rearrangement of the latter's categories. In their initial framing, the problems treated by Agamben are quite obviously modelled in Heideggerian terms,

especially in the construal of aesthetics as the field where art dies; and in conceiving art as an ‘origin’, meaning here: the originary event of world disclosure (Heidegger, 2002: 50).<sup>1</sup> As Reiner Schürmann puts it, ‘[s]o understood, the origin is irreducible to everything born of it, notably to *technē* and science’ (Schürmann, 1987: 125). Apart from a general strategy of thinking art as *poiēsis* — and hence as mode of unconcealment radically different from technology — Agamben skirts around the gestures of Heidegger’s artwork essay, notably the semantics of *Riss* (rift) so important for many Left Heideggerian readings. Instead, Agamben transposes the Heideggerian notion of ‘destruction’ from ontology to aesthetics, tacitly playing on its technical sense as being not a ‘negative’ method, but an attempt to ‘stake out the positive possibilities of the tradition’ (Heidegger, 1996: 20). If, for Heidegger, this operation ‘has no other intent than to reattain the originary experiences of being belonging to metaphysics’ (1998: 315), it should come as no surprise that Agamben’s destruction of the aesthetic regime will attempt to retrieve the originary experience of art.

The decisive operation of Agamben’s arresting rewriting of Heidegger’s philosophy of art is to position this methodological ‘destruction’ in relation to ‘a link of some kind between the destiny of art and the rise of that nihilism’, which, Agamben adds, Heidegger diagnosed as the ‘fundamental movement of the West’ (Agamben, 1999: 27). What is nowhere to be found in Heidegger is, of course, the claim regarding a ‘link of some kind’ between art and nihilism, since, for him, the riddle and importance of art is precisely its potential to serve as the resistant element in the epochal history terminating in the *Gestell*.<sup>2</sup> Instead of merely subsuming art under the narrative in which being comes to nothing, however, Agamben’s ‘destruction of aesthetics’ makes itself, as we shall see, both systematically and historically, dependent upon an anti-aesthetic current in art, which Heidegger fails to take note of. Others have hinted at this parallel, most notably Jean-Luc Nancy, who characterises the Heideggerian *Destruktion* as the ‘philosophical counterpart’ to the aesthetic negations that punctuate modern art (Nancy, 2015: 48). Taking this strange affinity in a very specific direction, Agamben’s ‘destruction’ is repeating and resisting, negating and redeeming the nihilism which he identifies as the essence of art’s negativity. This is how the

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<sup>1</sup> Note, however, that Heidegger explicitly exempts Kant from the attack on aesthetics in Nietzsche, where he goes to some lengths in presenting ‘Kant’s Doctrine of the Beautiful: Its Misinterpretation by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche’ (Heidegger, 1991: 107–114).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, Heidegger systemically avoids, as Shane Weller (2008: 52) shows, employing the term ‘nihilism’ in his writings on art, but implicitly positions poetry as a counter-nihilistic resource.

book's opening and closing metaphor — 'that the fundamental architectural problem becomes visible only in the house ravaged by fire' (Agamben, 1999a: 6; cf. 115) — is meant to be read: art's own anti-aesthetic destructions have wreaked havoc on the aesthetic regime, allowing for Agamben's 'positive' destruction to uncover the artwork's original structure in the ruins. This dialectic of danger and rescue determines, then, the structure of the entire argument to come.

In many ways, the story Agamben tells in *The Man Without Content* is a negative account of the genesis of art's autonomy, a process that figures it as loss, fragmentation and demise. As always in his work, however, this implies no linear narrative of decline, but the construction of a critical relation to the present, a method Nancy aptly characterizes as 'counterfactual' (Nancy, 2018: 193). What is shattered in the present, Agamben argues, is the original unity of the artwork and the 'shared concrete space of the work of art,' where artist and audience are closely related (1999a: 37). The scission produced by the rise of aesthetics plays out between two poles: on the one hand, the increasingly distanced spectator, who judges the aesthetic object; on the other, the artist for whom the growing distance of the observer translates into a voiding of the shared cultural heritage, such that the artist is left eventually 'without content'. Unable to suture these rifts, the artist increasingly becomes the one who is supposed to create *ex nihilo* from the void of an eclipsed tradition and for the anonymity of the disinterested aesthetic observer. As such, the two poles of the aesthetics regime are mutually reinforcing and lead to a continuous deepening of the fracture that lacerates the fabric of cultural transmissibility. Nothing, henceforth, remains of tradition, nothing but the transmission of negation.

In light of the distance Agamben takes from Hegel in all of his subsequent works, it is revealing that he borrows, extensively and explicitly, from the *Aesthetics* at this point to conceptualise this process, especially the thesis concerning a growing subjectivisation that deprives art of its highest vocation. Approvingly glossing a passage from Hegel's lectures, Agamben explains the dialectic at the heart of his genealogy in the following terms: 'The original unity of the work of art has broken, leaving on the one side the aesthetic judgment and on the other artistic subjectivity without content, the pure creative principle' (1999a: 37). But the even more surprising use Agamben makes of Hegel occurs as he infers from this argument an essential complicity between art and nihilism. With this move, Agamben radically reconfigures the relation between Hegel and Heidegger, such that the former establishes the link between art and nihilism that the latter painstakingly resists. Having posited the connection between a fragmentation of the cultural heritage and the unbinding of the creative principle, Agamben argues



that this dynamic signals and elicits a convergence of creation and destruction. This is because, he argues, ‘the pure creative-formal principle, split from any content, is the absolute abstract inessence, which annihilates and dissolves every content in its continuous effort to transcend and actualize itself’ (1999a: 54). Lacking in content, creation is bound to turn into annihilation, the ‘pure force of negation’ (1999a: 56).

It is, in fact, Hegel’s critique of Romanticism that Agamben credits with the essential analysis of the allegedly nihilistic signature of modern art. Notoriously, Hegel attacks the contemporary Romantics *ad homini* for their notion of irony, which he casts as the absolutisation of negativity, an immoral, Fichtean subjectivism. For the subject of Romantic irony, Hegel argues, elevates itself above every determined content, and imagines itself ‘as a divine creative genius for which anything and everything is only an unsubstantial creature, to which the creator [...] is not bound, because he is just as able to destroy it as to create it’ (1975: 66). The negativity of irony, Hegel concludes in uncharacteristically moralizing vein, ‘lies in the self-destruction of the noble, great, and excellent’ (1975: 67). Although Hegel never uses the term ‘nihilism’, this criticism does converge with Agamben’s theory of a nexus that ties together subjectivism, creation, and negation. Basing his analysis on a slightly strained translation of Hegel’s ‘*ein Nichtiges, ein sich Vernichtendes*’ as ‘self-annihilating nothing’, Agamben reads this actually condescending description as a crucial diagnosis of art’s nihilistic vocation:

At the extreme limit of art’s destiny, when all the gods fade in the twilight of art’s laughter, art is only a negation that negates itself, a *self-annihilating nothing*. [...] Limitless, lacking in content, double in its principle, it wanders in the nothingness of the *terra aethetica*, in a desert of forms and contents that continually point it beyond its own image and which it evokes and immediately abolishes in the impossible attempt to found its own certainty. (1999a: 56)

A striking, not to say unsettling alignment with Hegel, especially in light of the role this attack on Romanticism played for the concept of *désœuvrement*. For it is Blanchot who acknowledges, in a highly significant passage, this same attack on the Romantics as describing art’s ‘turning the principle of destruction that is its centre against itself’, but only to call this Romanticism’s ‘greatest merit’ and to link it, crucially, to *désœuvrement*, the Romantic unworking of the art work (Blanchot, 1993: 356–357). We will see that Agamben eventually comes to accept

this anti-dialectical appraisal of Romanticism, but here the characterization of Romantic irony as ‘self-annihilating nothingness’ is turned into a diagnosis of the state and fate of modern art. In irony, art withdraws into consummate nihilism, that ‘extreme nullifying unveiling’, as Agamben renders it elsewhere (Agamben, 2000: 84).

Not coincidentally, perhaps, it is also at this point that a certain ambiguity emerges in Agamben’s text, which becomes strikingly manifest in a phrasing that seems to anticipate his own philosophical project: ‘And since art has become the pure potentiality of negation, nihilism reigns in its essence’ (Agamben, 1999a: 57). It would be too facile, even outright wrong to claim that this ‘pure potentiality of negation’ is simply inverted into the ‘potential not-to’ or ‘*désœuvrement*’ in Agamben’s later work. Still, one can begin to have a sense of the demanding reworking of negation effected through impotentiality by juxtaposing this Hegelian critique of Romantic negativity with Agamben’s figure of choice: ‘Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality’ (Agamben, 1999b: 253–254). In fact, the elaboration of pure potentiality as privation is throughout Agamben’s work marked by an insistent differentiation from negation, and so he is at pains to state in regard to Bartleby that ‘nothing is farther from him than the heroic pathos of negation’ (1999b: 256). Impotentiality, as begins to transpire here, is, then, not just the other of negation, but an attempt to think negation otherwise, negativity as pure potentiality as opposed to the potentiality of pure negation. And might this not be what Agamben calls ‘the hardest thing’, namely to be ‘capable of annihilating this Nothing and letting something, from Nothing, be’? (1999b: 253)

But the Agamben of *The Man Without Content* is not yet the thinker of that thought and so the ambivalence becomes more pronounced as he unfolds his thesis. Having diagnosed nihilism as the essence and destiny of art, Agamben goes on to claim that ‘the crisis of art in our time is, in reality, a crisis of poetry, of *poiēsis*’ (1999a: 59). Agamben first follows Heidegger closely here in construing *poiēsis* as letting something come or enter into presence, before he advances — in an attempt to read Heidegger with Benjamin — the thesis that *poiēsis* is split wide open in the modern age. Another cleavage: this time of *poiein* into technology proper, the industrial product defined in terms of reproducibility; and its antithesis, art as aesthetical, defined in terms of originality (1999a: 60–61). This set-up undergirds Agamben’s analysis of what he considers the most significant forms of contemporary art, the assisted readymade and pop, both of which are construed as critiques of originality that bring the fissure in poietic activity to a



critical point. That these procedures effect a critique of originality is, of course, hardly a very original claim, but Agamben's thesis goes much further than such conventionalism. Pop art and the readymade are, according to him, opposed yet complementary practices that not only confront the high with the low but, more significantly, disclose the mechanism of scission and separation constitutive of the aesthetic regime.

Their vectors point in different directions. Whereas the readymade is an industrially produced commodity endowed with the claim to aesthetic singularity, pop presents itself as a work of art bereft of all aesthetic qualities, likening itself to the serial logic of mass fabrication. In an important text, Claire Fontaine defines the operation of the readymade through the concise formula: 'The ready-made is an aesthetic object that has no aesthetics, or whose principle of individuation is not aesthetic' (2014: 57). In Agamben's scheme, the Duchampean readymade corresponds to the latter description, whereas pop is indexed to the first. The convergent effect of both of these practices — paradigmatic forms of 'de-skilling', as they have come to be called (Roberts, 2007) — is that they reveal the split that defines the contemporary structure of *poiēsis*. In addition, Agamben spells out how this relates to the second pole of his scheme, the aesthetic judgement. Anticipating Thierry De Duve's influential rereading of 'Kant after Duchamp' — according to which the readymade reduces the judgement 'this is beautiful' to 'this is art' (De Duve, 1996: 302–303) — by more than two decades, Agamben shows how these procedures arrest the mechanism of the aesthetic judgement.<sup>3</sup> Since with the readymade, he explains, aesthetic judgement is confronted with its own exclusionary logic, and 'what it is supposed to trace back to non-art is already non-art on its own, and the critic's operation is limited to an ID check' (Agamben, 1999a: 50). Turning the excluded non-aesthetic qualities into its sole content, the readymade draws out the complicity between the formal emptiness of judgements of taste and the negative determination of art as an aesthetic object.

We have, then, a genealogy of contemporary art as being constituted by a series of fractures, driven by negation and gravitating towards consummate nihilism. Aesthetics is not only at the origin of these fractures, but, in the readymade, it also turns into the ultimate target of negation. As aesthetical, art is ceaseless creation and can be so only as negation, fragmentation, annihilation. Pushing this logic to the limit, the readymade occupies the place where this

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<sup>3</sup> Naturally, De Duve introduces this shift in order to salvage a post-Duchampean notion of aesthetics (or to re-aestheticize the readymade), whereas Agamben explores the connection for the opposite reason.

mechanism turns full circle, where the artwork recoils from itself, negating its determination as an aesthetic object. Here, then, the constitutive ambivalence in Agamben's early work comes fully to the fore. Agamben feels bound to portray the negativity of art as consummate nihilism, yet he is in solidarity with this negativity to the degree that it effects an auto-destruction of the aesthetic regime. He wants to free art of its raging negativity, but he cannot disavow it. Without the solidarity, the account would succumb to a mere conservative lamentation about contemporary art's destructiveness, ugliness, inhumanness and the like. Without the problematization of this negativity, there would be no impetus for the reconstructive intent. This ambivalence betrays itself when Agamben boldly posits that the 'most radical critiques of aesthetics' effected by artists themselves have still remained 'inside aesthetics' and have thereby perpetrated its nihilism. (Agamben, 1999a: 72) This means: art is riveted to nihilism, but not irredeemably so; it points beyond itself in its self-negation. But to trace the passage outside aesthetics is the exclusive privilege of philosophy. Agamben's 'destruction of aesthetics' reveals itself, eventually, as the philosophical negation of aesthetic negation.

### **Aesthetics Abandoned**

Before examining the tensions involved in this peculiar operation in more detail, the orientation of Agamben's early theory can be brought more clearly into view through a comparison with three prominent accounts of the relation between art and negation. In a particularly relevant passage from *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno tellingly notes that 'negativity' is the name used by 'the enemies of modern art, with a better instinct than its anxious apologists', to characterize it (Adorno, 1999: 19). Analytically, Adorno makes exactly the same point as Agamben when he contends that art 'does not [...] negate previous artistic practices, as styles have done throughout the ages, but rather tradition itself' (1999: 21). Adorno makes this claim, however, to read modern art's negation of transmissibility as a form of resistance, not to portray it as loss: 'Scars of damage and disruption are the modern's seal of authenticity; by their means, art desperately negates the closed confines of the ever-same [...]. Anti-traditional energy becomes a voracious vortex' (1999: 23). There are, it should be noted, other strata in Adorno's aesthetics, most notably an anticipation of Agamben's current terminology, which occurs in a characterisation of Samuel Beckett's work as marking the 'point of indifference [*Indifferenzpunkt*] between sense and its negation' (Adorno, 2003: 450–

451). In his adherence to negativity as a critique of tradition, however, the contrast between the early Agamben and Adorno could not be more pronounced.

Yet, Agamben's position is as far removed from this view as it is from Badiou's, in certain ways *the* contemporary counter-position to Adorno. As rigidly schematizing as ever, Badiou divides negation into a purely negative part, which he terms 'destruction'; and an 'affirmative' creative part, which he terms 'subtraction'. In keeping with his general *damnatio* of the avant-garde as an unfortunate amalgam of romanticism and didacticism, he proposes to leave the notion of a purely negativistic negation behind in favour of an affirmative one (Badiou, 2005: 7–8). 'That the very essence of negation is destruction has been the fundamental idea of the previous century. The fundamental idea of the century that is beginning must be that the very essence of negation is subtraction' (Badiou, 2017: 43). It may appear that Agamben's approach is more akin to Badiou than Adorno, since he by all means wants to avoid holding art in the state of a perpetual endgame inside aesthetics, on which Adorno's theory is bent, at least on a standard reading. Yet the rapport between the account developed by Agamben and art's own negativity is markedly different from Badiou's appeal to a new 'affirmationism'.

For the young Agamben, his own, methodological 'destruction' is both a continuation of, and a remedy against, art's self-annihilation, not its affirmative counter-model. Therefore, the readymade and pop are not only cast as an endgame of aesthetics, but as pointing outside of aesthetics, even if 'only negatively' so. (1999a: 66) In their absolute alienation, their transmission of nothingness, only these forms of high negativity inhabit a zone from which it might be possible 'to exit the swamp of aesthetics and technics and restore to the poetic status of man on earth its original dimension' (1999a: 67), as Agamben writes in an idiom that draws perilously close to Heidegger's. In this regard, Agamben is, then, not only far from Badiou and Adorno, but also from Walter Benjamin, the last position that must be mentioned here. Since, for Benjamin, 'the liquidation of tradition in the cultural heritage' — anticipated through the avant-gardes and carried out through film — is but the flip side of a 'positive function' of technology, which Benjamin could still conceive as the 'innervations of the new, historically unique collective' (Benjamin, 2008: 22, 45n). Despite the frequent references to Benjamin in *The Man Without Content*, this optimistic view of technology is radically at variance with Agamben's proposal.

Resisting all of these options, Agamben ties the destruction of aesthetics to the recovery of the original structure of *poiēsis*. By tracing the evolving dominance of *praxis* over *poiēsis*, he discloses the movement through which the understanding

of the artwork crossed from the latter to the former. The important point here is the contrast between the Greek *poiēsis*, where art is the passive passage of something into presence, in line with his understanding of truth as unveiling and an ontology of the event; and *praxis*, central to which is the expression of the artist's will, which captures being in the framing of a subject and its objects. This onto-theological humanism of *praxis* subtends the convergence of creation and destruction in the aesthetic regime and provides the negative foil for Agamben's attempt at thinking *poiēsis* in relation to the 'original structure' of the artwork. Taking a passage from Hölderlin as his point of departure, Agamben elaborates this as 'rhythm', which brings man into contact with his 'authentic temporal dimension' (Agamben, 1991a: 101).<sup>4</sup> Rhythm, recast as a stoppage and arresting of time, Agamben notes in a dense but ultimately rather vague passage, defines the original structure of the artwork, inasmuch as it is capable of opening the space of man's 'belonging to the world, only within which he can take the original measure of his dwelling on earth' (Agamben, 1991a:101).<sup>5</sup>

If the artwork once opened man's original place, then its self-annihilation is of course no mere plight of aesthetics. The artwork's alienation, Agamben explains, 'is the fundamental alienation, since it points to the alienation of nothing less than man's original historical space' (Agamben, 1991a: 102). Eventually, the proclaimed complicity of art and nihilism reveals itself here as a manoeuvre for investing art — and only art — with the capacity of overcoming the fate of nihilism, turning the *terra deserta* of art into the critical zone of catastrophe and rescue. If, as Rebecca Comay argues, the shared ground between Heidegger and Benjamin is the conviction that 'the task of history is to convert danger into saving' (1992: 159), and if it is this strategy that Agamben most clearly seeks to inherit here, then he still does so in a dangerous vocabulary. Not only in the terminology he risks throughout — original space, alienated essence, unity — but the entire structure of the argument comes close to an arche-teleological closure that sublates the destruction of art into a retrieval of its original essence. This, then, is both the beauty and the limit of overcoming artistic negation through a 'destruction of aesthetics'.

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<sup>4</sup> Note that Agamben possibly construes this section as a dialogue with Blanchot, given that Blanchot (1982: 220–222) glosses the same Hölderlin passage in his meditation on the 'Characteristics of the Work of Art'.

<sup>5</sup> The theme of stoppage, caesura and interruption is further developed in several works of Agamben, for example in *The End of the Poem* (1999: chap. 8).

Naturally, for the young Agamben, the restoration of the original structure of the artwork is no certainty and it cannot be achieved through any kind of chronological regression. But even so, as nihilism reveals itself as aesthetics' *telos* it points art back towards its *archē*, suggesting the possibility of an exodus from the devastated site of *terra aesthetica* to a new *terra poetica*. Appropriately enough, the book's last chapter construes the contemporary situation as being caught between past and future, where the possibility of a different beginning suggests itself in Kafka's abolition of content for the sake of transmissibility. Although Agamben is certainly not nostalgic about any specific pre-modern form of art, his analysis ends with a troubling gloss on the possibility of turning 'history into myth'<sup>6</sup> (1999a: 114). None of this, however, will appear again in Agamben's texts after the remnants of revelatory reversals have disappeared from it in favour of a thinking of potentiality and inoperativity. Beyond origin and negation, inoperativity names an operation that neither recuperates nor destroys, neither gathers nor disseminates, neither breaks nor unites. Rather, it is a form of privation that holds negation in suspense.

### **From *Destruction* to *désœuvrement***

In the growing literature on Agamben's work, it has gone all but unnoticed that his second book, *Stanzas*, opens with a *volte-face*, a radical recasting of one of *The Man Without Content*'s main theses. Returning to the very same pages of the *Aesthetics*, Agamben inverts his earlier view, declaring that Hegel's characterization of Romantic irony as 'self-annihilating nothing' — which even serves as the title of a chapter in his first book — is but an 'ill-willed' definition (1993: xvi). For, Agamben now explains, Hegel's entire analysis 'misses the point: that the negativity of irony is not the provisional negative of the dialectic, which the magic wand of sublation (*Aufhebung*) is always already in the act of transforming into a positive, but an absolute and irretrievable negativity that does not, for all that, renounce knowledge' (1993: xvi). The notion of a 'self-annihilating nothing'

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<sup>6</sup> Agamben's comment on myth is in keeping with a more or less obvious strand running through Heidegger's writing on art. According to this view, myth is the most 'archaic' of all *technai*, first, because *technē*, as a mode of unconcealment, is in its essence language and, second, because myth, Sage, is, in language, the originary force of naming and gathering. For more on this, see Lacoue-Labarthe 1990: 84–85. A more favourable reading could see this recourse to myth as an echo of Agamben's early reading of Artaud, cited above. One should, in any event, contrast this comment on myth with Agamben's scathing remarks in *The Open*: (Agamben 2004: 6–7).

is then taken up once more in a discussion of Charles Baudelaire, which returns to Agamben's earlier claim that, in modernity, art is bound to sever its link with the tradition 'in order to make of its own self-negation its sole possibility of survival' (1993: 43). Instead of diagnosing this as nihilism, however, Agamben reads it as art's achievement to make 'the work the vehicle of the unattainable' and hence to restore to 'unattainability itself a new value and a new authority' (1993: 43).

Yet, in the following subchapter, which further develops the reading of modern art as the appropriation of an irreality through negation, Agamben at one point seems to repeat the critique of *The Man Without Content* as he addresses the 'eclipse of the work' in modern poetry. This theme is, again, traced back to a privileging of the creative process, linked to Romantic irony, and exemplified through the Situationists' failed negation of art.<sup>7</sup> Despite this lingering ambivalence, it is evident that Agamben has discarded the equation of aesthetic negativity and nihilism to consider a different modality of privation in art. After *Stanzas*, he does not explicitly follow up on this hint of an 'irretrievable negativity', but it is not too difficult — and we may recall Blanchot's gloss on Romanticism and *désœuvrement* here — to see it as one step in a series of redeterminations that move from the 'pure potentiality of negation' (Agamben, 1999a: 57) to inoperativity. Henceforth, the concept of negativity doubles in Agamben's text; it is split between its nihilistic determination, which he had already attacked in *The Man Without Content*, and Bartleby's 'Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality' (Agamben, 1999b: 253–254), which can be considered its reconfiguration. Methodologically, the earlier attempt at a 'destruction' of aesthetics to retrieve an original experience of art shifts towards the elaboration of a poetics of inoperativity, which is complemented by an archaeological approach.

Accordingly, Agamben's 'Archaeology of the Work of Art' commences with the thesis that only an archaeology — that is, not a *Destruction* — offers a possibility of understanding the contemporary situation of the artwork (Agamben, 2019a: 1). As in the early work, this analysis is necessitated by the problematic character of art in the present, yet the parameters have shifted, since this problematic now no longer consists, Agamben explains, in a scission between artist and spectator, but in a 'crisis of the work', for which the dominance of performance and conceptual procedures are cited as evidence. And instead of evoking a pre-aesthetic experience of art as a contrast, Agamben details this

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<sup>7</sup> See Agamben, 1993: 50–51, 54–55. Note that Agamben also cites Bataille's notion of negativity as expenditure in this context (fifth scholium).



problematic status of the work of art by referencing an essay by Robert Klein (1983) whose title, ‘Eclipse of the Work of Art’, suggests that Agamben had already read the piece by the time he wrote the almost eponymous scholium in *Stanzas* (‘Eclisse dell’opera’).<sup>8</sup> In any event, Klein argues that the actual, yet sometimes occluded target of all anti-aesthetic strategies of the twentieth century has not been art as such, but rather the *œuvre*, the artwork as a sedimentation of aesthetic value.<sup>9</sup> Having thus reframed the point of departure, Agamben contends that if contemporary art presents itself increasingly ‘as an activity without a work’, then this is because ‘the being-work of the work of art had remained unthought’ (Agamben, 2019a: 3). His archaeology proper is then carried out by means of an analysis of three paradigms, where contemporary art in its entirety is presented as the heir of the avant-gardes, with Duchamp occupying a unique position.

At first, Agamben rehearses, in a few dense paragraphs, his reading of Aristotle’s understanding of *energeia* and *dynamis* to establish the parameters of the Greek understanding of the work of art. Crucial for this paradigm is that the work of art belongs to the sphere of *energeia*, and that the end, the *telos* of art, never resides in the artist’s activity, but solely in the work, the finished product: that is to say, it exists independently of the artist and his or her action. Superior to this domain, on this interpretation, is the sphere of praxis, inasmuch as it is a form of *energeia* that does not materialise in a work, but has its *telos* in itself. For Agamben, this differentiation leads to a crucial aporia in Aristotle, splitting, as it does, the human into a being that has two works, one that belongs to him as *ergon* qua human being, and another exterior one that is his qua producer. Where this aporia comes to a head is in the question of whether the human as such has a proper work, or whether the human may be the being without a work, the latter option forming, of course, the basis for Agamben’s thinking of potentiality. Against this backdrop, Agamben posits the hypothesis that, in a slow process starting in the Renaissance, art crossed from the sphere of activities that have their *energeia* outside themselves into the sphere of those that ‘like knowing or praxis, have their *energeia*, their being-at-work, in themselves’ (Agamben, 2019a: 7). This

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, Agamben mentions Robert Klein’s work at several junctures in *Stanzas* and dedicates the third part, ‘Manibus Aby Warburg et Robert Klein, “Der gute Gott steckt im Detail”’; but he does not quote the article in question, which was originally published in 1967 (Agamben, 1993: 61).

<sup>9</sup> Agamben’s phrasing ‘crisis of the work’ is tacitly adopted from Klein (1983: 409).

analysis returns, clearly, to many of the concerns of *The Man Without Content*.<sup>10</sup> Decisively, however, the claim of an original *poietic* vocation, to which the artwork is related, has disappeared from the framework, or has rather been rephrased as impotentiality. With a characteristic gesture, Agamben focuses on a fracture between *ergon* and *energeia*; but the rapport between the terms has shifted significantly:

The hypothesis that I would suggest at this point is that *ergon* and *energeia*, work and creative operation, are complementary yet incommunicable notions, which form, with the artist as their middle term, what I propose to call the ‘artistic machine’ of modernity. (Agamben, 2019a: 8)

The second paradigm Agamben proposes as an interpretive grid is, perhaps surprisingly, liturgy, a theme he had investigated in the years prior to the writing of the essay, as evinced by the extensive discussion in *Opus Dei* (2013: chapter 2). Focusing on Odo Casel’s work, he argues that the liturgic mystery establishes a purely performative understanding of practice, where liturgy is not the representation of a pre-given signified, but in itself the performance of a sacred event. On this basis, Agamben posits a connection between this understanding of pure pragmatics and contemporary art, for, just as liturgy is in itself the event, contemporary art, he asserts, is defined by the ‘decisive abandonment of the mimetic-representative paradigm in the name of a genuinely pragmatic claim’ (Agamben, 2019a: 11). This eventual notion of work amounts to a hybrid state between *poiēsis* and *praxis*, oscillating as it does between the production of a work and a praxis that has its end within itself: a mechanism that presents artistic activity *as work*, without materialising itself in a self-sufficient work.

While it may at first appear as if Agamben’s reframing of this problem in terms of *poiēsis* and *praxis* was a mere rehearsal of the argument that since modernism the work-status of the work of art has increasingly been eroded, the argument, in fact, directly touches on a pressing issue in theories of contemporary art pertaining to the link between artistic activities and the determination of the work-status. In an analysis of the dialectic between the abandonment of the work-character and the various mechanisms that have emerged to re-establish the institutional functionality of these practices (attributing an author function,

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<sup>10</sup> In another recent text, titled ‘Opus Alchymicum’, Agamben even reiterates the characterisation of the artist as ‘a man who no longer has content’ to describe the abolition of the work (2017: 119).

securing the singularity of the work etc.), Martha Buskirk aptly describes the changes in the ontology of the artwork with the phrase ‘the contingent object of contemporary art’ (Buskirk, 2003). According to Buskirk, the absolutely contingent physicality of art increasingly necessitates, on an institutional plane, the reliance on the construction of authorship and work-status by ever more refined means such as certificates, authorial plans, documentations and other supplements. This corresponds to the shift Agamben traces, for it registers the undetermined relation of work, author, and creative activity that are bound together in the ‘artistic machine’ by way of institutional mechanisms.

As the third and last point in his archaeology, Agamben returns to Duchamp. Four decades after his first book, he revises his interpretation of the readymade. It appears no longer as an unrestrained negation, nihilistic in essence and destructive in intent, but, on the contrary, as a ‘deactivation’ of the ‘artistic machine’ of modernity, which ‘in the liturgy of the avant-garde had reached its critical mass’ (Agamben, 2019a: 12). Hence it is, again, Duchamp who turns against a certain development of art, but the readymade is, crucially, no longer a form of negation; rather it is a form of deactivation. Here we have, then, the direct shift from negation to deactivation. However, Agamben posits that the readymade cannot in any sense be considered as a form of *poiēsis*, since there is nothing that comes into presence. Still, what comes to light with it is ‘the appearing of the historical conflict, decisive in every sense, between art and work, *energeia* and *ergon*’ (2019a: 13), a phrase that that is evocative of, and invites comparison with, Lyotard’s characterization of Duchamp’s work as ‘*opus expeditum*’ (Lyotard, 1990: 11).<sup>11</sup> At this point, however, Agamben’s analysis ends abruptly.

On the one hand, Agamben criticizes a perceived ignorance of this conflict in contemporary art; on the other, he seems confident that Duchamp has definitely deactivated the ‘artistic machine’. Suggesting that this development should be affirmed, Agamben urges that we abandon with it ‘the idea that there is something like a supreme human activity that, by means of a subject, realises itself in a work or in an *energeia* that draws from it its incomparable value’ (Agamben, 2019a: 13). Beyond the *dispositif* of creation, Agamben suggests, the artist must be understood as a living being that constitutes a form of life. The contrast to the earlier hope of a re-founding of the original structure of the artwork is striking, but perhaps even more so is the rapport that this conclusion establishes

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<sup>11</sup> Also see Emmanuelle Ravel’s attempt to link Blanchot’s notion of ‘*désœuvrement*’ to Duchamp and the readymade (2007: chap. 4–5).

with Agamben's theory of art as an activity of rendering inoperative, which is here clearly alluded to, but not developed.

### **The Absence of Work**

In *Creation and Anarchy*, Agamben's most programmatic text along these lines — 'What is the Act of Creation?' — appears directly after this archaeology. Despite this apparent continuity, however, there is a tension, not to say a contradiction, between the approaches underwriting these respective essays. Whereas the archaeology of the work of art diagnoses the rise of an 'artistic machine' that is in need of deactivation, the theory of inoperativity offers a generic theory of art as *poiēsis*, apparently immune to the historical determinants which the archaeology has just brought to light. Only under that condition, it seems, can Agamben write, returning to the claim about man as a being without pre-determined work or essence, that art and politics are 'neither tasks nor simply 'works': they name, rather, the dimension in which linguistic and bodily, material and immaterial, biological and social operations are deactivated and contemplated as such' (Agamben, 2019b: 27).

However, this definition — according to which art in general is a form of rendering inoperative — seems foreclosed through the archaeological analysis that shows how the understanding of art is governed, in the Greek paradigm, by the production of an *ergon* and, in the modern paradigm, by an increasing obsession with the creative activity of the artists, presented as, or substituted for, the work. Both, it seems, elaborate historical mechanisms that prevent art from functioning as a practice of inoperativity. But is this seeming contradiction the only possible interpretation open to us at this point? Although the link is nowhere sufficiently developed by Agamben, the dissociation of the link between 'art' and 'work' opens up another interpretive possibility. The hypothesis I would like to present is that a comparison of the texts against the backdrop of the earlier analysis of negativity shows that they can be seen as elaborating a reworking of aesthetic negativity. This can also clarify the oblique way in which Agamben has implicitly differentiated here a problematic idea of art as 'activity without work', where praxis is simply taken as a substitute for a work; and the definition of artistic inoperativity as a true 'absence of work'.

In 'What is the Act of Creation?' Agamben takes as his point of departure Deleuze's definition of art as a form of resistance, a view Deleuze further

elaborates in *Abecédaire* as the freeing of a potential of life (Deleuze, 2007).<sup>12</sup> With a by now familiar gesture, Agamben shifts Deleuze's affirmative accents towards privation in order to detail the link which joins together potentiality and resistance. As we know, on Agamben's heterodox reading of Aristotle, potential depends on impotential, which establishes the primacy of non-exercise over actualisation. By that token, actualisation appears as a derivative of impotential, a compromising (or a simple negation) of the specific modality of impotential — an indeterminate and non-relational negativity, a privation that holds itself in suspense. In a passage crowded with privative prefixes and negation particles, Agamben outlines this specifically 'negative' modality of impotentiality: 'The living being, who exists in the mode of potential, is capable of his own impotential, and only in this way does he possess his potential. He can be and do because he preserves a relation with his own not being and not doing. In potential, sensation is constitutively anaesthesia; thought is non-thought, work is inoperativity' (Agamben, 2019b: 18). In keeping with this theory of a generic impotentiality that holds itself in suspense, Agamben argues that, in art, the passage to the act is only possible if this potential-not-to is, in a certain way, transferred into action, retained in actualisation such that it interrupts a direct transition from potential to act.

As he elaborates on this issue, one can see how Agamben is carefully, if obliquely, reworking notions of aesthetic negation to establish the specificity of this modality of privation. Decisively, he has recourse to Benjamin's concept of the expressionless — which, as the shattering of unity and totality in the artwork, is at the heart of his early anti-aesthetics — to unfold his thesis that 'resistance acts as a critical instance' that withholds potential from being resolved in the act (Agamben, 2019b: 19).<sup>13</sup> And in further explaining this aspect, Agamben is bound to stress, again, that 'the potential-not-to does not negate potential and form, but, through this resistance, somehow exhibits them' (Agamben, 2019b: 21). This aspect is even further heightened if we recall that the germ of this entire theory can be found in Agamben's analysis of Guy Debord's films. In this text, Agamben already has recourse to Deleuze's definition of the act of creation as resistance and insists on the privative aspect of 'decreation', which he identifies with the hard breaks in the cinematographic montage, obviously the moment of negation

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<sup>12</sup> Agamben's text also continues his engagement with Deleuze's notion of potentiality, the earlier scenes of which are perceptively discussed in Watkin, 2014: 160–176.

<sup>13</sup> On the negativity of the expressionless, see Rauch, 2018: 332–336.

in film, for Debord (Agamben, 2002: 318).<sup>14</sup> Throughout, the elaboration of a poetics of inoperativity thus relies upon, references, and recodes notions of aesthetic negation. This can be quite clearly shown by juxtaposing Agamben's early and later comments on Debord. In *Stanzas*, he writes that the situationists 'who, in the attempt to abolish art by realizing it, finish rather by extending it to all human existence' (1993: 54); by contrast, in the 'Marginal Notes' on Debord's work, included in *Means Without End*, one reads: 'The situation is neither the becoming-art of life nor the becoming-life of art. [...] The "Northwest passage of the geography of the true life" is a point of indifference between life and art, where *both* undergo a decisive metamorphosis *simultaneously*' (2002: 77). From attempting a failed form of negation, the practice of the Situationists appears, as was the case with Duchamp, in terms of inoperativity and decreation.

The point of tracing these links is not to reclaim the theory of inoperativity as a traditional thinking of negation, but to show how it transforms the very idea of negativity in art, how it offers us a different vocabulary, establishing a notion of negativity that cannot be framed in the oppositions bequeathed to us from the 1960s. If Agamben's early work hinged on an ambivalence towards artistic negations, then the theory of inoperativity offers a way to think about such practices outside the poles of origin and negation. No originary, pre-aesthetic experience is accessed; no negation is enacted; no alienation demands the recuperation of unicity. Rather Agamben claims that 'the properly human praxis is that which, by rendering inoperative the specific works and functions of the living being, makes them, so to speak, run on idle and in this way opens them to possibilities' (2019b: 27). Here, 'rendering inoperative' or 'deactivation' have, again, formally taken the place of negation or destruction, while the restoration of an 'original structure' has been transformed into the vindication of the 'properly human praxis', which has precisely nothing to do with the proper, essence or origin, but simply denotes non-relational potentiality as the absence of any pre-given end. Critical artistic practices of negation are, then, no longer cast as that ambivalent site where nihilism reigns supreme and from which it might be surpassed. Rather they designate, alongside politics, activities where an 'absence of work' is vindicated (2019b: 27).

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<sup>14</sup> The term 'decreation' suggests yet another crucial reference point in Agamben's rethinking of negativity: Simone Weil — arguably an implicit interlocutor throughout Agamben's work — defined 'decreation', in opposition to the 'nothingness' of destruction, with the formula 'to make something created pass into the uncreated' (Weil, 2003: 32).



Where does all of this leave Duchamp? Agamben seems to resist granting the Duchampean form of ‘deactivation’ a privileged position in his general theory, since he disqualifies it, as a form of *poiēsis*. Yet, it is Duchamp who carries out, according to Agamben’s own analysis, the decisive ‘deactivation’ of the historically operative ‘artistic machine’. Duchamp, he argues, effects a deactivation of the ‘artistic machine’, only to add that the readymade has been transformed into a work of art once again, establishing the pre-condition for the afterlife of the ‘artistic machine’ in contemporary art. But this afterlife — with its manifold resurrections of the fictions of the artwork, creativity, genius and value — has proved persistent indeed and shows little sign of coming to a halt. Given this situation, one more step in the argument becomes possible, namely extending the scope of inoperative practices in contemporary art beyond the Duchampean paradigm.

In light of this, different forms of the deactivation of institutional mechanisms that stabilize and sustain the various fictions of the ‘artistic machine’ should be considered in terms of inoperativity. In fact, the diagnosis that Agamben puts forward in *The Use of Bodies* could serve as the definition of a crucial tension that many artistic practices are trying to *solve* rather than perpetuate: ‘*The truth that contemporary art never manages to bring to expression is inoperativity, which it seeks at all costs to make into a work*’ (Agamben, 2015: 247). The next step in the analysis developed here would be to investigate a whole array of practices as a response to this aporia, paying close attention to the different forms in which institutional and discursive mechanisms are deactivated in the practice of several contemporary artists. Think, for instance, of Sturtevant’s appropriation of Duchamp, undertaken at a time when his readymades had been fully integrated into the museum apparatus as numbered editions. Responding to the domestication of Duchamp’s gesture, Sturtevant’s exact repetition of several readymades sought to restore their deactivating force over and against their canonization as works. Or consider Philippe Thomas, who tried to escape completely from those mechanisms that constitute what Agamben termed the ‘artistic machine’. To this end, in 1987 Thomas founded the agency, ‘readymades belong to everyone’, which turned anyone who acquired a work automatically into its author — a gesture through which Thomas simultaneously sought to expose the mechanisms of the art world and to evade them as far as possible. And, finally, think of Claire Fontaine, who declared herself a ‘readymade artist’. Refusing to respond to the demands of originality and received ideas of criticality, Claire Fontaine has, over the last few years, attempted a kind of Agambenian ‘study’ of preceding forms of appropriation. Through a series of decisive artistic and discursive interventions,

they developed what may be one of the most effective attempts at turning the powerlessness of current political art — its empty centre — into a form of impotentiality and decreation: ‘Thinking against ourselves will mean thinking against our identity and our effort to preserve it, it will mean stopping believing in the necessity of identifying ourselves with the place we occupy’ (Claire Fontaine, 2013: 55).

If it is true that the ‘contemplation of a potentiality can only be given in an opus’, then such liminal practices, which can only gesture towards in closing, should be considered as paradigms for understanding how ‘the opus is deactivated and made inoperative’ (Agamben, 2017: 137). Doing so would not only allow for a finer differentiation of these critical practices from conventional understandings of avant-garde negation, in terms of which they are too often understood, whether in a laudatory fashion as renewal or a derogatory one as stale repetition. It would also make it possible to bridge the gap between Agamben’s generic theory of art as inoperativity and an archaeology of the historical determinants, which make art hostage to the apparatus of ‘activities without work’ and prevent it from enacting the demand of inoperativity — the ‘absence of work’. For the vindication of such a suspended form of negativity, the deactivation of works and the contemplation of impotential should not be thought of as something definitive, final and pure; rather, it can only ever exist in and as the plurality of these artistic abandonments.



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