*We have to proclaim the end of the end of history, to reclaim the future, and to start building. Eventually, we end up asking ourselves: Is there room for utopia after utopia?* – Laura Naum and Petrică Mogoș[[1]](#footnote-1)­

# 3. Dimensions of Independence: What Is Independent Culture?

## 3.1. Independencies and Futurologies

What can we learn about the concept of independence given the previously conveyed information? In the first place, a strictly situated definition of independence can be derived from the genealogy. Looking at the practice of independent cultures in Zagreb and the use of the term ‘independent culture’ by actors in the scene, I distinguish four different dimensions of independence.

At the basic level, there is formal independence. This can be defined as economic and governmental independence from any external body or force. Even if independent cultures have grown to be formally dependent upon the successive Croatian governments, their identification with the term ‘independence’ denotes the historically specific, often marginal position of Croatian civil society. Independent culture consists of those actors that were pushed out of the institutions during the post-Yugoslav institutional crisis and regrouped in civil society. The formal dimension of independence in the context of Croatia thus mainly signifies a systemic position: independent culture is formally opposed to institutional culture.

Then, there is the political dimension of independence. I once met someone at a gallery opening who did not work in the cultural field. I asked her: ‘Are you familiar with the notion of independent culture?’ She laughed at me and said: ‘Of course I am! Everybody in Croatia knows that’. I realized there and then that the very term independent culture is a topos of political contestation. It simply goes without saying that politics are an important aspect of independent cultures. Maja Flajsig characterized independent culture saying: ‘It’s always against oppressive systems and it’s always on the left’. With hardly any exception, these organizations are politically left leaning, socially engaged, inspired by the traditions of artistic modernisms, the antifascist struggle, and Yugoslav self-management socialism, and aim to be critical and politically effective. Moreover, this public image is enforced by the fact that independent culture is regularly targeted by conservative politicians. The fact that the authorities pay close attention to independent cultures, also legitimizes them and provides them with leverage to address certain issues. Therefore, Maja Flajsig remarked that ‘independent culture is corrective of society, because it deals with problematics that are invisible, such as racism, issues of migration and the way that our current politics are trying to forget the antifascist movement’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A third dimension of independence is signified by the fact that independent cultures in Zagreb represent a semi-open identity – let’s call this differentiated independence. Tomislav Medak uses the concept of a ‘fault line’ to describe the constellation of independent culture ‘running from centrist liberalists to anarchist factions’ – even though independent culture is definitely predominantly left-oriented.[[3]](#footnote-3) This concept is useful in understanding this semi-open identity within independent culture. If Booksa is on the liberal side of the spectrum, BLOK is clearly on the Marxist side. At the same time, MAMA is run by people representing both. Despite the existence of these differences, pragmatic collaborations across fault-lines have taken place and created an important basic sense of trust and collectivity. However, these fault-lines do in effect demarcate independent culture from everything else. Independent culture is not, or at least not at this moment, considered to be a sub-culture. Neither is it propagandistic. It is not direct politics. It is not veteran clubs, museums, or artists’ associations. As such, these fault lines demarcate both internal and external differentiation.

A last dimension of independence inherent to the scene independent cultures in Zagreb is aesthetic independence. Since it is simply impossible to neatly define the independence of independent cultures in terms of a uniform political agenda, cultural practice, or identity, it is clear that independent culture cannot be defined exclusively in terms of local contextuality, political agenda, identity, or historical trajectory.Instead, the community of independent cultures is self-questioning, sometimes more porous, other times less, but never hermetic, meaning that it constantly re-negotiates itself. It does so within the scene – a specific common-yet-heterogeneous space of articulation within and beyond normalized ways of seeing and understanding the common world.

According to Goran Sergej Pristaš, the term scene is used in independent culture today exactly to describe and criticize, quite simply, ‘what is seen (and what is not)’.[[4]](#footnote-4) When, in an interview, Antonija Letinić differentiated between the apolitical term ‘independent culture’ and the politicized term ‘independent cultural scene’, she confirmed that the artistic, cultural and political modes of expression of independent cultures inscribe a sense of community and a division of parts (an in- and exclusion), and thereby act upon the ways in which human sensibility itself is shaped and disciplined.[[5]](#footnote-5) Therefore, by using aesthetic means, independent cultures in Zagreb work towards independently shaping and defining a common world.

These four dimensions of independence emerge from the genealogy of independent culture in Zagreb, the combination of which create a situated definition of independence. The relevance of independence in culture is, however, not limited to the Croatian context. Underpinning the future of independent cultures and their legitimacy in Croatia is the more general question: what can independent culture be today? What independence is at stake here, and on which conception of freedom is it based? And finally, what new perspectives and futurologies can be formulated with this independence? Therefore, I will now attempt a leap from the local genealogy to a general theorization of independent culture. I believe that the first step in adapting a translocal perspective towards a theory of independent culture is to acknowledge the gap between the local and the general and to embrace productive untranslatability.

## 3.2. Untranslatability

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999)*,* Gayatri Spivak reminded the reader that ‘the great narrative of Development is not dead’ in the post-historical era.[[6]](#footnote-6) The neo-colonialism that has replaced colonialism in the decades after 1989 was characterized by the progressive imperialism of globalization that subsumed international discourses on emancipation of the subaltern into the flow of capital and the American hotpot. Especially today, during the decline of American hegemony and the rise of anti- or alter-globalist sentiments amongst neoconservative elites throughout Europe and beyond, it seems important to reconsider the implication of independent cultures in the dominant cultural order and the flow of capital in terms of capacity of formulation. For what is the question of a new futurology but the question of capacity to formulate one’s own (collective) future?

With regards to the genealogy above, there are two issues that can be elaborated at some length. Firstly, how civil society in Croatia is a contested area between ‘indigenous NGOs’, local nationalist movements, and progressive imperialist organizations, and, secondly, how the experience and political reality of the Non-Aligned Movement is historically under-represented. On these issues and their interrelation, Spivak stated:

The governments of developing nations are, with the disappearance of the possibility of nonalignment in the post-Soviet world, heavily mortgaged to international development organizations. The relationship between the governments and the spectrum of indigenous non-governmental organizations is at least as ambiguous and complex as the glibly invoked “identity of the nation”. The NGOs that surface at the “NGO Forum”s of the UN conferences have been so thoroughly vetted by the donor countries, and the content of their so organized by categories furnished by the UN, that neither subject nor object bears much resemblance to the “real thing,” if you will pardon the expression.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In other words, (memories of) radical, decolonial, grass-root positions are almost impossibly formulated now that cultural dominants in the globalized field of civil society are (former) Western organizations such as the UN, the EU, the World Bank, the Soros Foundation, and the Erste Bank. Even though the money from these sources can, of course, be used in great ways – most of the independent cultural scene in Zagreb would not have existed without it – these money flows also represent neo-imperialist reason.

One crucial characteristic of this neo-imperialist logic is the imperative of complete, commensurable translatability of language, experience, economies, and social systems for the good of accumulating and expanding capital. This is why the post-1989 condition is, as Boris Buden calls it, *translational*.[[8]](#footnote-8) The simple example of the Big Mac Index, produced by *The Economist* every year since 1986, is self-evident.[[9]](#footnote-9) This supposed translatability applies to all aspects of social and personal life: the free market, the institutions of liberal democracy, universal human rights, the English language, free culture and press, and certainly to the arts, too. Mladen Stilinović once made a banner which said it all in a single sentence: ‘An artist who cannot not speak English is no artist.’

Within Europe, the translational condition is defined by a simple dichotomy: the (former) East and the (former) West. The (former) West functions as the original, always one step ahead, the (former) East as the translation, always one step behind.[[10]](#footnote-10) Since this book is situated in between (former) East and (former) West, the question of translatability is of import here. Over a coffee at the now-endangered Kino Europa, Boris Buden advised me: ‘You have to put yourself into question here [in Zagreb], because let us be frank about what we [interviewees] are to you. We are Native Informants’.[[11]](#footnote-11) The point was that, as a researcher educated within the dominant cultural regimes of (former) Western academia, I am also implicated in this neo-imperialist discourse. The voice of the activist striving for emancipation in the (former) East is typically considered to be the testimony of a Native Informant, that is, a univocal representation of an entire social group, and as such it can be instrumentalized by the (former) West as a justification for interventionist politics and military action.[[12]](#footnote-12) The question becomes, then, how to avoid this assumption of translatability which would serve primitive accumulation and further centralization of Europe. To simply acknowledge the effects of a long history of colonial repression and infantilization would be a good start, but nowhere near enough. It also requires critiquing my own subjectivity and the discourse that sustains it.

In *Reconfiguring the Native Informant: Positionality in the Global Age* (2005), Shahnaz Khan attempted to ‘rethink the relationship between researcher and informant’ in order ‘to produce an account that is neither orientalist nor apologetic and to work toward building transnational feminist [decolonial] solidarity’ drawing on experience of her specific research on Pakistan’s *zina* laws.[[13]](#footnote-13) Khan distinguishes between at least three types of native informants: the native informant *over there* (the conventional native informant), the native informant *over here* (the researcher in the (former) West), and the reader. What makes interviewee, writer, and reader into native informants is the contribution their own frames of reference and layers of meaning, which simultaneously render complete understanding of the other impossible and create space for creating of new knowledges. This differentiated understanding of the native informant allows for a transgression of the ‘imagined monolithic and homogeneous Other’, to borrow Sharareh Frouzesh’s words.[[14]](#footnote-14) Instead, a gathering of native informants with different local experiences may constitute a differentiated (in the most direct sense of the word) translocal perspective, a ‘moving base’, with a privileged insight in global regimes of power and how they play out locally.[[15]](#footnote-15) It is with this understanding of native informing that I hope to, in Sarat Maharaj’s words, ‘recode the international’ while taking into account ‘the untranslatability of the term other’.[[16]](#footnote-16)

This is certainly not an easy balancing act. For there should be some caution with regard to the naïve optimism about alter-globalism that arguably characterized critical discourses in the 1990’s. During a talk at Galerija Nova a few days after our coffee, Buden explained how the global economic crises and ‘migrant crisis’ have impacted the way we look at societies and their material borders. We no longer live in the translational condition of incessantly fluid borders. A renewed call for walls and borders is supposed to soothe the sense of crises initiated by waves Middle Eastern migrants, floods of cheap low-quality products from Asian countries, and streams aggressive investors from the U.S. Therefore, the condition we live in is not a simply globalized and translatable one (although it’s not de-globalized either). Throughout Europe, the general discourse regarding moving bodies has radically altered, and we find ourselves in a *transitional* condition.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Even though the globalization of capital continues as Google offers readymade meaning carried over by automated translation with incessant ease and new world powers have risen to challenge the lasting hegemony of the US in its own language, national languages and identities in the transitional condition are reinforced by strictly redrawing (time and again) the borders of nation state territories. In other words, the demand of translatability of commodities – whether it is the translation of any good into any currency or the word of any language into its English equivalent – continues to exist, but the absolute untranslatablity of identities is continuously set against it – a magic spell to neutralize the frustrations of globalization. Every country becomes a tectonic plate of socio-cultural unity: better to stay on the safe, homogenous middle ground than on the dangerous edges. This tendency has been going on for a while now and, as a result, the average European citizen speaks only two languages: the national mother tongue and English.[[18]](#footnote-18) Therefore, Buden asserts that transition has led to a change in the general condition of language. The new condition no longer presumes complete commensurability, but entails what he calls a *revernacularization*.[[19]](#footnote-19) Hence, once again, national borders are becoming the explosive areas of direct confrontation with the Other.

Thus, by the simultaneous regimes of globalization and revernacularization, the dangerous image of the wide and heterogeneous world is effectively reduced to a single, all-encompassing (global) market divided into neat little homogenous compartments (countries). Rather than in an age characterized simply by globalization, we live in a time of vernacularized globalism. To recode the international would be to subvert this dual hegemony of, on the one hand, clannish language of neoconservative nationalism, and the commensurable language of neo-imperialist reason on the other – in the context of the unspeakable traumas of war and migration.

### 3.2.1. From Autonomy to Independence

Written from the position of a semi-outsider to the scene, I would also like to see my research as a contribution to the destabilizing of both unproblematically commensurable and unquestionably vernacular linguistic practices. Especially when it comes to locally applied yet internationally relevant terms such as independent culture, the embrace of the complex and always problematic possibilities of translation combined with critical internationalism offers the possibility to break open entrenched debates and to formulate common futurologies anew.

The discourse of independence in culture is one of those with the ability to break open entrenched debates. In the process of translation of the every-day Croatian term ‘nezavisna kultura’ to English by a Dutch-speaking person, I reconstructed its ‘native’ meaning, which was, of course, a pre-failed attempt. The translation necessarily lost the effortless, self-evident nuances inherent to the collective political and cultural consciousness of the Croatian historical trajectory. But at the same time, the act of translation reinvented ways of expression to recapture these nuances – only to end up with new inventions, new meanings, rather than the forever-lost original. This, then, is the status of the word in the time of technical translatability: caught in limbo between absolute commensurability and absolute incommensurability, ridden of the aura of originality.

But beyond the re-vernacularized mind-set, beyond the totalities of clannish and commensurable language, beyond the myth of original meaning, and beyond the fear of the monolithic Other, the realm of the untranslatable opens up as one of possibilities rather than loss. Exactly in the very untranslatability of the term independent culture, in the ways in which the term refuses to uncover its fundamental meaning to the outsider, the word ‘independence’ becomes a crystal of significance and a catalyst of meaning-making towards a theory of independent culture.

One of my biggest limitations is my inability to speak Croatian, which leaves myself, the interviewees, and the produced book unable to escape the hegemony of the English language.[[20]](#footnote-20) My use of the word ‘independent cultures’ is therefore something very different yet also really the same as when used by the native informant *over there*. It refers to the same material condition but implies different cultural connotations. In the Netherlands, discussion of the dependence-independence pair belongs to political theory much more than to cultural discourse. My peers in Amsterdam (and probably in London, Paris, and Berlin), still under the spell of Frankfurt school critical theory or in some cases the Italian autonomists, would much rather speak of autonomy-engagement. Why do these differences in discourse exist? Are these simply (former) Western European and (former) Central-Eastern European versions of the same discussion, or is there something else going on? It could very well be associated with the general tendency in the former West to disqualify avant-gardes under socialism for their lack of autonomy, or with the lasting influence of Soros’s ‘open society’-discourse and its promotion of independent media and culture, but this I do not know for sure. In any case, I do insist that the intervention of the term ‘independence’ into the autonomy-engagement couple allows for an important re-evaluation of the entrenched debate on the possibility of critical culture under neoliberalism. In order to effectively do so, however, a further consideration of independence is required, this time departing from concepts rather than practice.

## 3.3. The Problem of Formalism

### 3.3.1. Sovereignty

The definition of independence could be pursued as formal self-determination. In this definition, independence equals the complete absence of dependence. This is intuitively the most ‘direct’ meaning of independence, and maybe the most deceptive. It is both passive and negative: it refers to a systemic position in pre-given material structures. Designed to function as a demarcation principle, delineating everything that independence cannot ever be, namely dependence, formal independence is as exclusive as it is static. It can only describe a situation of absolute power of self-determination, which is always-already and completely outside of the realm of dependency.

There is a simple historical reason for this intuitive interpretation. The application of the formal notion of independence to media is commonplace. Also, ‘independent culture’ emerged as the cultural antipode of ‘independent media’ in Croatia’s autonomist circles of the tactical media scene. So, it could easily be concluded that, like in media, independence in culture implies: integrity; transparency about incomes and spending; party-political impartiality; absence of bias and (self-) censorship; the goal to be an uncompromising and corrective mirror to society. Even though the values behind this idea are relatively unproblematic, it is unlikely that this idea of independence as a pillar of a ‘healthy’ democratic society is as applicable to culture as it is to media. Yet, theoretically, formal independence suggests something more than a correlation between independent media and independent culture. With its references to the function of culture in democratic and ‘open’ societies, this notion of independence invokes the discourse of liberal political theory proper and the philosophy of freedom associated with it.

Now, in Westphalian political theory, of which liberal political theory is a part, independence is often considered to be the condition resulting from *sovereignty*. Sovereignty is in turn defined as supreme (legal) power – the only power which is not derived from a higher power. This independence-sovereignty pair was an invention of generations of political experts translating theology into secular concepts, in order to transfer absolute power from God to the sovereign rule of nation-states, whether that be monarchies or republics.[[21]](#footnote-21) Within this secularized theological order, independence has little meaning unless the proclaimer of sovereignty has the power to force others (in power) to recognize and believe in it. Moreover, since the secular has come to equal the marketized in late capitalism, sovereignty exists only as the equilibrium between two possibly conflictual entities, both choosing to acknowledge each other’s sovereignty in order to avoid costly conflict and to promote trade.

The problem of applying this formal concept of independence to culture, the equating of independence with the exercise of sovereignty is evident. Some entities, such as the global financial markets or tech companies, might be sovereign today. But even the sovereignty of nation-states is crumbling due to incessant globalization – the panic-stricken reactions to which we witness today throughout Europe: Brexit, cultural conservatism, the ‘Eastern European crisis’, and rising autocracy. In this context, independent media are under heavy pressure and the idea of sovereign culture seems wishful thinking, to say the least. All cultural production is dependent upon factors determined by power structures which are external to the realm of cultural production, and which can never reasonably be expected to become internal: the presence or absence of private money, the presence or absence of public money, the possibility or impossibility of contribution of unpaid labor, etc. In this sense, critical cultural production simply lacks the position of power to have its claims of sovereignty met with acknowledgement. So, if independence is the condition resulting from the exercise of sovereignty, the closest thing to independent culture is culture that works in line with the dominant ideas of the still-mostly-sovereign nation-state it functions within. In other words, if independence follows from sovereignty, critical independent culture does not exist today.

### 3.3.2. Entrepreneurial Freedom

One might object to the idea of absolute sovereignty, arguing for the possibility of partial or individual sovereignty of cultural workers. It is true that artists might work in their free time, independent of the monetary economy; that digital curation practices can be sustained by independent crypto-mining; independent publications by crowd-funding campaigns; community festivals by the sales of coffees and sandwiches; and social design documentaries by pay-what-you-want donations and sustainable merchandise. But even though these may be wonderful types of independence temporarily, defining personal or partial independence without questioning the framework of sovereignty inherent to the globalized and neoliberalized condition of today, is a losing battle. The reason for this is simple: the freedom to build something at one’s own initiative, power, and risk, independently from any external actor, depends on the myth of magical volunteerism. It’s American Dreaming.

The idea at the basis of this dream, which is the idea of the absolute freedom derived from sovereign creation of the self (the self as first cause), still always sub-ordinated to a divine or moral Cause, is what Julia Kristeva called *entrepreneurial freedom*. Kristeva explains the concept in a technically complicated, yet striking way:

[…] in a society more and more dominated by technique, freedom thus conceived progressively becomes a capacity to adapt to a “cause” always exterior to the “self”. […] Little by little, this productivist causality becomes less and less moral, and more and more economic, to the point that it reaches its proper saturation, it brings the necessity of a support through its symmetrical guarantee that is the moral and/or spiritual causality. In this order, freedom appears as a freedom to adapt itself to the logic of causes and effects: to the logic of production, of science, and of economy, itself supported by the interdicts of moral reason. The logic of globalization and that of liberalism are the outcome of this freedom, in which you are free … enclosing you in the process of causes-effects in search of goods, and/or of the supreme Good. The supreme cause (God) and the technical cause (Dollar) end up appearing as the two variants that sustain the functioning of our freedoms within this logic. [[22]](#footnote-22)

As it functions politically today, entrepreneurial freedom is the ability to try and to fail, to try again and fail better, and, maybe, to succeed at some point. (*Success*, of course, meaning nothing more or less than the approval of our divine cause called *Market*.) It is, in other words, the freedom to compete. This notion of entrepreneurial freedom is inherent to neoliberal logic and since the idea of independent cultures is, amongst other things, a product of neoliberalism, it has been used in independent cultures too. Entrepreneurially free independent culture is the wet dream of neoliberal power: individuated, fragmented, precarious, governable, harmless.

### 3.3.3. The Other Freedom

We know from practice that independent cultural organizations generally find more freedom in collaboration than in competition, and that, especially in the age of digital networks, subaltern voices *can* be heard. We also know that such a thing as criticality in culture still exists under regimes of suppression and instrumentalization. Examples are plenty and various.

In 1980s Amsterdam, the housing situation was so poor that youths and students took to squatting en masse. They established the very vocal and resistant squatter movement to demand affordable housing, in the process saving the centuries-old inner city from deterioration and demolition.[[23]](#footnote-23) During the regime of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, small independent publishers started spreading critical newspapers and exposés, establishing the so-called Mosquito Press. Similarly, in the Soviet Union, grassroots dissident publishing took place in *Samizdat*, a wide-spread underground network of writers, readers, publishers, and distributors who spread reading material amongst each other illegally. As Vladimir Bukovsky put it: ‘Samizdat: I write it myself, edit it myself, censor it myself, publish it myself, distribute it myself, and spend jail time for it myself’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Today, those types of critical cultural expression are often mediated by the internet. Inspired by memes of ‘Nubian Queen’ Alaa Salah, large crowds protested against 30 years of militarist rule on the streets of Khartoum in the spring and summer of 2019. Quite obviously, this freedom of the speaking subject is a type of freedom unaffected by the repression of political and market powers. If anything, the desire to be freed and to speak freely is stirred up by the threat of its own extinction.



‘Nubian Queen’ Alaa Salah orating to a sea of cellphones in Khartoum, 12 April 2019. Source: ‘Soudan: Alaa Salah, le visage de lá revolution,’ *RTL France,* 12 April 2019, <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/international/soudan-alaa-salah-le-visage-de-la-revolution-7797417372>.

Kristeva’s topology of freedom accommodates for this non-entrepreneurial freedom. If, to Kristeva, entrepreneurial freedom is ‘the instrumentalization of the speaking being’, the other type of freedom is ‘the being of the speech that is opened up’: ‘In desiring, [this freedom] gives itself, and in presenting itself thus as other to itself and to the other, freedom is freed. […] It is a question of inscribing freedom in the essence of the speech of man as the immanence of infinite questioning’.[[25]](#footnote-25) This other freedom, beyond entrepreneurship, let’s call it emancipatory freedom, is closely related to the many faces of resistance. In a Foucauldian manner, it could be argued that emancipatory freedom comes into play when an individual states: ‘I choose not to be subjected *like this.*’ This does not mean that freedom of infinite questioning is the endless whining about the inevitable deterioration of everything usually displayed by reactionaries. On the contrary, the previous examples show that the freedom of opening up space is resistance against the non-communicability of the impartible Other. To cite Kristeva once more, resistant and emancipatory freedom is based on the human endeavor of empathy and ‘the radical experiences of sharing the unsharable [*de partage de l’impartageable*]’.[[26]](#footnote-26)

While on this tour through French critical theory, it is worth making a quick stop at the work of surrealist novelist-philosopher George Bataille. While I went to some length to reject the use of the notion sovereignty, as it is commonly understood, to theorize independence in culture because of the political theoretical framework implied in that notion, Bataille’s work offers an understanding of sovereignty which is more apt to the theorization of emancipatory freedom, therefore more helpful to a theory of independent culture. To him, sovereignty is ‘to enjoy the present time without having anything else in view but this present time’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Thus, strikingly, Bataille thinks of sovereignty as a phenomenon entirely unconnected to administrative or legal issues and, more importantly, one entirely distinct from utilitarian or market reason. This sovereignty exists in the moment of direct act upon desire, in the moment of unknowing. Think of shamelessly eating that whole bar of chocolate, or of the sovereign surrealist art of automatic writing. Also, think of the cases of emancipatory freedom discussed above. Squatting the Amsterdam canal houses or meming the Nubian queen has not primarily been an act of utilitarian reason – even though it’s had its effects. In the first place, it was an act upon desire: the desire for shelter and feel at home; the desire to shout out and express one’s opinion; the desire to be the multitude and celebrate freedom in commonality.

While Bataille’s sovereignty is an individual matter, emancipation goes a step further: through individual sovereignty, a common claim to reality is established. By the individual act of speech aimed at sharing the unshareable, common desires, hopes, fantasies, knowledges and values are recalibrated. New ways of looking at past, present and future can be imagined outside of the technical cause (Dollar). So, even if resistance begins with the individual, emancipatory freedom is a collective matter that requires common agency. Is it possible to theorize this mediation of individual sovereignty and collective emancipation in today’s cultural praxis?

## 3.4. The Aesthetics of Independence

Slavoj Žižek once said that because of Rancière’s ‘passionate advocacy of the aesthetic dimension as inherent in the political […] His thought today is more actual than ever: in our time of disorientation of the Left, his writings offer one of the few consistent conceptualizations of *how we are to continue to resist*’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Rancière’s work is diverse, covering topics ranging from ideology to student protests and from theatre to the crisis of democracy, but it is always concerned with a ‘cartography of a common world’ created by means of excavation of the regimes of the distribution of the sensible.[[29]](#footnote-29) Rancière defined this distribution of the sensible as ‘the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it’.[[30]](#footnote-30) In other words, it is the aesthetic-political process by which regimes of power make visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, tangible and intangible, thinkable and unthinkable. If the question of emancipatory freedom is one of perception and speech, of what is speakable and what unspeakable, an important lesson from Rancière would be that it is also a question of aesthetics.

Here, the possibility to theorize independence in culture beyond sovereignty and entrepreneurial freedom presents itself. The freedom in its independence relies on two things: first, independent political subjectivity; and, second, the aesthetic independence of collective (re)distribution of the sensible. As long as the cultural dominates the political, it will remain caught up with the bourgeois myth of autonomy, while the domination of the cultural by the political leads to the dead-end street of homogeneity and propaganda. Independent culture can therefore only exist when art and politics play with one another through independence.

The common practice of independent cultures, in being aesthetic in Rancière’s sense, is not necessarily directly political, but always inherently of political consequence. It speaks about why this or that photograph is framed as it is, but also raises the question of why I always run into the same people in the city center of Zagreb, even though the city has a million inhabitants. Why are most of them invisible to me? The answer can be: because of gentrification and lack of mobility, but also: because of an ‘aesthetics of the real’.[[31]](#footnote-31) Aesthetics, in this sense, is not the discipline of beauty and ugliness. It talks about the regimes of distribution of the sensible and the agency of determining them. It talks about dependence and independence of perception. At stake is a communal independence, rather than an individual one, for regimes of distribution of the sensible are never structurally re-determined individually. What is it that brings some people together in the struggle for perception and articulation, while not including others?

To further elaborate how this aesthetic independence in culture functions, I must turn to aesthetics proper and address a question I have avoided up to now: what is the relation between independence and art in the Rancièrean notion of aesthetics that I am using?

Rancière has traced three major regimes of distribution of the sensible in Western history: the ethical, the representative, and the aesthetic regimes. In the ethical regime, which Rancière traces back to Plato’s *The Republic,* all images ought to be concerned with the ideal forms in such a way that they would serve the ethical development of the community. The representative regime, which became dominant in the 17th and 18th centuries as the liberal arts were separated from the mechanical arts, foregrounded the ideals of mimesis and liveliness: the codification of expressions of thoughts or feelings in art, such that art was so real that it could give make insightful human nature. The aesthetic regime, which came into dominance when the representative regime broke down during the revolutions of the late 18th century, and the clear distinction and hierarchy between the different arts broke down too, and instead postulated art as a privileged category of its own in which pure form and everyday worldliness belong together.

Rancière has spent the better part of two decades tracing different regimes of distribution and their workings in an endless chain of essays. In this analysis, he restricts himself to the formal analysis of art works or media, so as to unveil the ‘major forms’ that ‘bring forth […] figures of community equal to themselves’.[[32]](#footnote-32) For instance, he analyzed how the major form of the novel led to novelistic democracy, how Art Deco, Bauhaus and Constructivism created new forms for a new life through their handling of ornamentation and purity, and how the (re-)invention of perspective in Renaissance painting asserted the ability of painting to capture living speech.[[33]](#footnote-33) In this vein, Rancière notes that:

The important thing is that the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics be raised at […] the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization. […] The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation they are able to lend them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the invisible.[[34]](#footnote-34)

It follows from this statement that the aesthetic politics of art can never be declarative. On the contrary, the meaning of the work of art is inherent to the sensible impact of the formal, perceptible qualities of the artwork on its observer (or on the community of observers it creates).

Some important theoretical tools to take Rancière’s theory and apply it to the actual circuits of cultural production and distribution were created by Boris Groys and Claire Bishop. Even though this debate is pretty well-known today, it deserves a closer look.

Under the current aesthetic regime, according to Rancière, art is conceived of as the collection fo (possibly ephemeral) objects ought to deliver aesthetic experience to their observers, or to ostensibly fail delivering such aesthetic experience, thereby delivering anti-aesthetic experience. In this sense, the conception of art under the aesthetic regime as described by Rancière is formalist. In his book *Going Public* (2010), Boris Groys launched an avid critique against this formalist art concept of the aesthetic regime. A cultural theoretician subjectivized in the circuits of the Russian samizdat and Moscow Conceptualists, Groys grew tired of aesthetic theory’s focus on the consumer or spectator. As Groys says, this focus has been dominant ever since since it emerged during the Enlightenment, simply because there are always more spectators than artists.

Groys reversed this question, and instead of asking why the public should consume art, he inquires: why does the artist create art? He rightly remarks that the work of art is not the natural and therefore inexplicable product of a genius, but a product of technical and political decisions by the maker. Therefore, he argues, ‘the politics of art has to do less with its impact on the spectator than with the decisions that lead to its emergence in the first place’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Consequently, in order to study the politics of art, one should start before the art work, which is impossible for aesthetics. So, to replace aesthetics altogether, Groys argues for a *poetic* view of art, which focuses on the creation of art as autopoietic practice: the self-creation of the artist as public persona. ‘In fact,’ Groys states, ‘there is a much longer tradition of understanding art as poiesis or techné than as aesthetis or in terms of hermeneutics. The shift from a poetic, technical understanding of art to aesthetic or hermeneutical analysis was relatively recent, and it is now time to reverse this change in perspective’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Away with consumption-based analysis of art, towards production-based logic.

The resonance of Groys’s critique is notable: every self-respecting critical art institution today prefers *poetics* over *aesthetics* in the titles of their exhibitions. As Rancière says, the politics of art are not (always) actively defined by the intention of the artist, to the extent that it is an object of aesthetic contemplation. But, Groys counters, neither are the politicity of the artwork or the artist defined exclusively by the way in which the formal qualities of the work can impact the spectator. The work was political from its very commencement, even if it never reached the stage of aesthetic product, because art also has politicity of active and intentional subjectivation through praxis – as does every action within the fabric of discourse. It follows that, in the exploration of the relation of independent culture, politics and art, the creation of independent culture as much as its consumption should be considered. The *techné* of independent cultural praxis is as important as its being-aesthetic.

There is, moreover, a second level to Groys’s critique of aesthetic discourse. He argues that, since aesthetics subordinate art production to art consumption, they automatically equal art to real social relations and thereby subordinate art theory to sociology too. As Groys rightly points out, artists of the historical avant-gardes acknowledged the social situatedness of art and sought to exert social effects through artistic practices. Groys identifies these tendencies as the roots of exactly those concepts that seek to conceptualize art in a way that will ultimately undermine it: avant-gardes such as Dada, the Surrealists, CoBrA, and the Situationist International always strived for the unity of art and life, and therefore for the end of art. Hence, the plethora of end-of-art-narratives that surrounded and explained modern art. But since the end of history happened to precede the end of art, and the result turned out to be far from utopian, the avant-gardes and their end-of-art-narratives are believed to have faded.

To Groys, sociology’s theoretical enclosure of art in reality is problematic for two reasons. First, he argues, ‘art was made before the emergence of capitalism and the art market, and will be made after they disappear. Art was also made during the modern era in places that were not capitalist and had no art market, such as the socialist countries’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Second, ‘art cannot be completely explained as a manifestation of “real” cultural and social milieus, because the milieus in which artworks emerge and circulate are also artificial. They consist of artistically created public personas – which, accordingly, are themselves artistic creations’.[[38]](#footnote-38) This second level of Groys’s critique is less convincing than his critique of consumption-focused analysis. Even though it is true that art has existed outside of capitalist regimes, this does not mean that art under capitalism should not be considered as such. Also, even if art is the product of artificial milieus, it’s unclear why this artificiality would somehow be unreal or non-real. The imagination of art, artists, and artist personas can transgress the status quo of dominant regimes, but there is no need to presuppose that (the inspiration for) art comes from outside reality.

While Groys traces back the subordination of art to sociology to the sociological attitudes of Dada and the Surrealists, the debate at hand here has relatively little to do with the historical avant-gardes. It is much better contextualized in the distinctly post-avant-garde trend that entered the art world in the 1990s and stayed there until today: the participatory art of the *social turn*. In the context of booming biennales, underpinned by theories like Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), the global art world has brought to fore the practices of artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija, Thomas Hirschhorn, Jeanne van Heeswijk, and the collectives Ruangrupa and Assemble: participatory, dialogic, communal, etc. In her seminal *Art Forum* essay ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’ (2006), Claire Bishop described this phenomenon and avidly critiqued its discourse.

Just like Groys, Bishop disapproves of the sociological dominance over artistic practice. In her view, the discourse of the social turn tries to prove that the artworks it discusses are socially relevant with such dogmatism, that it reduces artists to ethical agents and forgets to acknowledge art *as art.* (On a side note, this conception of art as social tool which forgets art as art feeds directly into the neoliberal discourse that aims to instrumentalize culture for gentrification and other social projects.) However, rather than seeing this sociological dominance as an inherent result of the aesthetic regime, as Groys does, Bishop considers it to be a result of lackof aesthetic discourse. She argues that ‘these practices are less interested in a relational *aesthetic* than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity’.[[39]](#footnote-39) Those who really look at art as a social product and thereby subordinate art to sociology, have lost sight of its aesthetic potentials. This insight leads Bishop to a major contribution to the discourse:

The emergence of criteria by which to judge social practices is not assisted by the present-day standoff between the nonbelievers (aesthetes who reject this work as marginal, misguided, and lacking artistic interest of any kind) and the believers (activists who reject aesthetic questions as synonymous with cultural hierarchy and the market). The former, at their most extreme, would condemn us to a world of irrelevant painting and sculpture, while the latter have a tendency to self-marginalize to the point of inadvertently reinforcing art’s autonomy, and thereby preventing any productive rapprochement between art and life.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The general misconception at the heart of this standoff is, as Bishop points out, that art’s autonomy or heteronomy are mutually exclusive: the idea that autonomous production and engaged practice can never exist in the same work – you have to pick one or the other. Bishop argues that, yes, autonomy and heteronomy are opposed, but this doesn’t mean that they are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are mutually dependent. According to Bishop, this is the exact contradiction in which art exists and which makes it lively. In reference to Rancière, she remarks that, under the aesthetic regime, we need the ability to think ‘the productive contradiction of art’s relationship to social change, characterized precisely by that tension between faith in art’s autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come. […] The aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the altar of the social, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise’.[[41]](#footnote-41) While social impacts cannot be all-encompassing measuring tools of art, it remains true that, as Rancière remarked: ‘Art does not exist in itself; it is an outcome of a complex set of relationships between what one is allowed to say, to perceive, and to understand. Events and objects only exist within the fabric of discourse, and are perceived as art, or a revolution in art, only within this fabric’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Even without the regimes of ethical responsibility, art is always-already inherently political because of its sensible agency.

As the distinction between art and reality thus fades, and the barrier between poiesis and the real as well, it appears that a technical-poetic view of art is not necessarily opposed to the aesthetic one. Rather, hermeneutic analysis of distribution of the sensible and the understanding of art as techné complement one another. Hence, the challenge that follows is this: to stick to the benefits of hermeneutic analysis offered by aesthetics, to add to that consideration of the creative process and techné, and to avoid formalism and consumption-based logic. With this insight, at last, we return to the relevance of independence in the debate. Analysis of independence in independent cultures under the aesthetic regime can help to break open the entrenched debates on autonomy, because independence is a way of thinking the contradiction between autonomy and engagement.

To go further into this, it’s time to go back to the practices of independent cultures and look at them more closely. So, where to look? Where does independent culture take place?

## 3.5. A Theory of the Scene

Distribution of the sensible is manifest in the *arrangements of partaking,* according to Rancière*.* That is to say, regimes of distribution of the sensible functionthrough the simultaneous constitution of parts (based on spaces, times, and forms of activity) within a common unity. In the case of independent cultures, the scene is the common unity in which partaking is arranged. If independent cultures constitute a community engaging in the practice of mapping, understanding, and transforming the common world, the scene is the lived context and the discursive fabric in which this community exists. To cite Rancière once again, the scene is an embedded but independent mode of sensibility, which we can observe by analyzing the shifting community of independent cultures that engages actively with the distribution of the sensible, mapping ‘a common world by determining forms of visibility of phenomena, forms of intelligibility of situations, and modes of identification of events and connections between events’ and thereby ‘determin[ing] the ways in which subjects occupy this common world, in terms of coexistence or exclusion, and the capacity of those subjects to perceive it, understand it and transform it’.[[43]](#footnote-43) To look at and understand the independence of independent cultures, the scene should thus be examined.

When he elaborated on his book *Aesthetis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* in an interview for Verso*,* Rancière explained that he understands scene as ‘a general mode of intelligibility’ that ‘suspends the opposition between the narrative of the fact and its explanation’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Through this suspension, the scene effaces the distinction between illustration and theory, being both a locus and a mode of praxis. Even though Rancière’s conception of the scene refers to theatrical scenes more than to social unities, it is remarkably applicable to the independent cultural scene. The scene of independent culture is a general mode of intelligibility which includes and excludes actors. It shapes the community as an embedded, sensible coexistence. By shaping itself in the scene and coming into existence through the scene, independent culture articulates its independence.

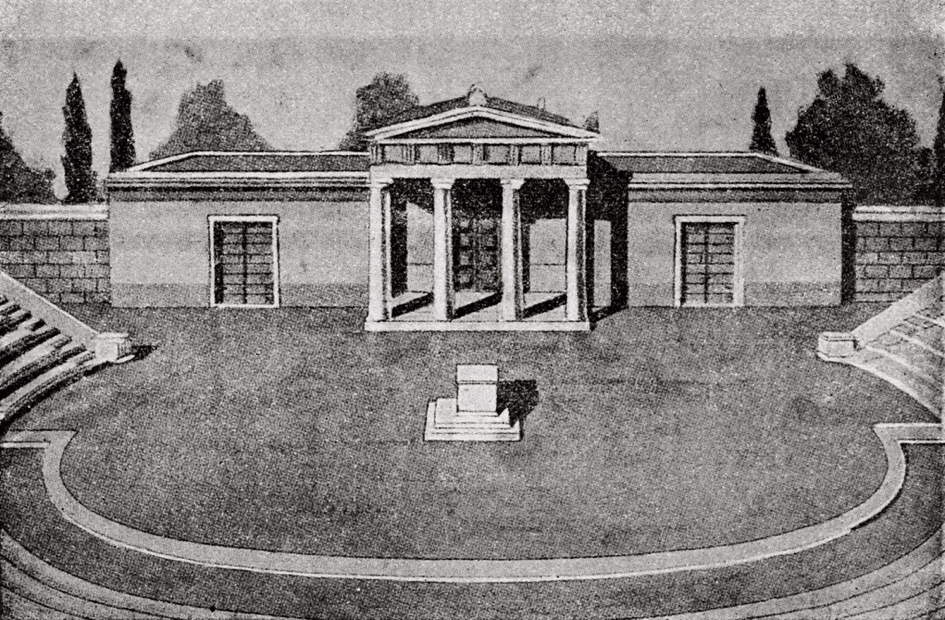
The notion of the scene has a wild history before becoming a classification of choice to the communities of critical practice in Zagreb in the 1990s. The English word ‘scene’ is derived from ancient Greek *skènè* (meaning ‘tent’, ‘hut’, or ‘shelter providing shade’), which initially referred to the theater house in the back of the stage in Greek theatre and later also to the wooden stage itself. Unlike the casual entertainment business of today’s theatre, the comedies and tragedies of Athenian theatre were yearly ritualistic happenings in the religious festival to honor Bacchus. The skènè was then the décor in the context of which actors engaged in collective practices based on systemic functions and roles in the social, political, and religious life of the City State. Moreover, besides being social, religious, and entertaining, these roles were also antagonistic, for the ancient Greek theatre was the space where the ideal of *parrhesia* (free speech) was publicly displayed and propagated.

For instance, in Euripides’ tragedy *The Phoenician Women* (c.411-409 B.C.), Oedipus’ mother and wife Jocasta tries to convince her two (grand)sons not to wage war against each other over the inheritance of the throne. Jocasta asks the younger son Polyneices, who’s been living in exile for a year: ‘What is an exile’s life? Is it great misery?’ Polyneices replies: ‘The greatest; worse in reality than in report.’ ‘Worse in what way,’ Jocasta further enquires, ‘What chiefly galls an exile’s heart?’ ‘The worst is this: right of free speech does not exist,’ Polyneices responds, to which Jocasta exclaims: ‘That’s a slave’s life – to be forbidden to speak one’s mind’.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The speaking of one’s mind which is at stake here, described by the Greeks as *parrhesia*, is defined by Michel Foucault as ‘a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)’.[[46]](#footnote-46) The figure of Socrates in the writing of Plato might be the best, or at least the best-known example of the parrhesiastes. Based on nothing but courage, virtuosity, and sense of duty, the parrhesiastes speaks truth to those who hold power over her or him, regardless of the harm they come to face as a consequence.[[47]](#footnote-47) The ethical criterion of ‘good art’ so prominently present in Plato’s aesthetic theory, according to Rancière signals the beginning of the ethical regime of art.

In parrhesiastic speech under the ethical regime, the ontological status of the spoken truth was not determined by some mental evidential experience. Instead, the truth of parrhesia lies in the very verbal activity, something that ‘can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework’, i.e. something that is hardly thinkable since positivism has become the common way of establishing truth.[[48]](#footnote-48) Yet, however hard to understand, judging from Greek theatre and philosophy, it appears that this always-necessarily *true activity* of parrhesia was thought to be a fundament of democracy. In the continuation of the conversation cited above, Polyneices makes it very clear that any ruler who claims who claims absolute power by denying his citizens the right to parrhesia, makes his citizens into slaves and himself into an idiot.

Now, of specific interest here is something Foucault did not pay too much attention to: the architectural space in which parrhesia took place as part of theatre’s techné. The theatre constituted a common space for parrhesia between actors embodying power relationships in front of the public through the ‘split reality of the theatre’ (that’s Rancière again).[[49]](#footnote-49) The theatrical space of parrhesia was not a space of direct politics, but an image-space in which society presented itself to itself. The aesthetic-political function of the skènè within this presentation was exactly that of demarcating the split reality: the reality of the image and the reality of the world. It was simultaneously an entry point to the stage and a cover from the visibility of the stage, as well as the division between the spaces of theatre and of ‘normal life’. Therefore, the skènè was the material boundary determining who was taking which part in the common activity of sensible presentation of society to itself, and who was not. So, when parrhesia occurred in theatre, the freedom of the speaking being was *staged*, as it was both engendered and restricted by the scene.



The skène in an ancient Greek theatre.



Braco Dimitrijević, *Casual Passer-By I Met at 1.15 PM, 4.23 PM, 6.11 PM, Zagreb, 1971,* 1971.

After a long absence from discourse, the notion of the skènè recurred in 16th century French scène, meaning a *specific part of a theatre play*. Then, in the 20th century, it took on different meanings in a variety of contexts, yet these had striking similarities on closer examination. The scene as a *site of crime* was first attested by Agatha Christie in 1923. In 1940s America, the word scene was frequently used by journalists to describe the *marginal and bohemian environment* associated with jazz.[[50]](#footnote-50) A decade later, the scenecame to denote a self-defined *setting or milieu for a specific group or activity* in America’s Beat circles. Since, the word has been especially popular amongst music communities: in addition to Beat scenes, we’ve seen rock scenes, punk scenes, metal scenes, goth scenes, and indie scenes.

The consistent relation between the notion of the scene and the tradition of the performing arts – from Athenian theater to American underground music – shows a strong convergence of scene with locality. A cultural activity is staged *on* the scene. An event has to take place at the right place (country, city, venue, studio) to be the real deal. But despite this system of street credibility, the 20th-century scene was not restricted to locality, nor was it necessarily underground or subcultural. The more successful scenes became so popular, that initial subcultures boiled over with exportable surplus production. Aspiring members in other cities started reproducing the scene that they liked, in order to establish a similar one in their own city. It helped that local scenes grew to be more translatable as they became more distinct from the mainstream, providing clearer criteria for the development of similar scenes elsewhere. Because of this, the scene came to mean a locality as well as a translocal phenomenon throughout and beyond America: *the* rock scene, *the* punk scene, *the* art scene, etc.

In this 20th-century meaning, the scene was still a space of freedom. Yet, since the ethical regime of art under which Greek theatre took place was replaced – first by the mimetic and later by the aesthetic regime – it was no longer primarily a space of speaking truth in the face of power. Rather, it was the space of autonomous and independent production and aesthetic practice, made possible by a distinctive position of relative marginality and (trans)local engagement. Scenes were the spaces where ‘alternative cultures’ could be independent unities, sometimes diverse and sometimes homogenous, as long as they retained their opposition to the mainstream industries. The marginal attitude of these musical scenes sometimes attracted – but, in many cases, already implied – transgressive attitudes on different levels: queer sexualities and genders, militant political subjectivities, the cultivation of ‘low life’. As such, the popular concept of the scene became a type of semi-open community, a buffer zone between pop- and subculture, and between hedonism and serious political action. Scenes became alternative mainstreams.

The phenomenon of the scene, designating (pseudo)transgressive communities with a strong attachment to locality, was at its height in the 1970s and 80s, but declined thereafter as quickly as it emerged. Today, Agatha Christie’s definition of the crime scene still lingers around while the Beat definition seems hopelessly outdated. Indeed, the (trans)locally embedded scene is diametrically opposed to the contemporary cultural dominant of globalized network culture. Cultural expressions of the latter sort, mediated by platforms, social media, and other features of the internet, not to mention cheap air travel, are detached from geographical locality and strict social boundaries (or at least, that’s the promise). In the 1990s, the internet seemed to create a possibility to have scenes that extended beyond any fixed locality. This was when online communities commenced and were recognized as scenes. Inspired by Hakim Bey’s notion of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), offline communities would sometimes start using digital networks to emerge in a guerilla space, dissolve before the authorities could catch up, and re-form elsewhere.

But, in early 2000s, the colonization of the internet by tech companies and nation-states started. As Jean Baudrillard remarked, ‘the categorical imperative of communication’ was instated through (digital) networks, giving rise to the obscene state of over-proximity in which we all know what our friends had for breakfast thanks to Instagram and in which porn has overtaken sex.[[51]](#footnote-51) Non-place and ex-timate relationships grew more and more important, weak links replaced strong links, the relation between scene and space was loosened, and, as a consequence, the scene itself largely disintegrated. The *screen* replaced the *scene*, Baudrillard concluded.[[52]](#footnote-52)

### 3.5.1. After the End of the Local

What is the place to the scene and what is the role of locality now that culture went global? There is a general division between two camps with two very different answers.

On one hand, a common reaction on the left (certainly also in the art worlds) to these growing levels of abstraction and complexity has been a return to the local, the transparent, the human-sized. After the dot.com-bubble, the legacy of the TAZ was reduced to lol-fueled flash mobs and the Burning Man festival. If in the 90s, the internet held the promise of independence on several levels, the question of independence has become one of avoiding the web in today’s age of Facebook, Amazon, and Instagram. There is no refuge in a return to the state either, since governments are enabling corporations more than culture or individuals. If not before, the implementation of Article 13 made this very clear: through this new copyright law, the European governments have enabled companies to survey and control individuals in ways that they could never do themselves.[[53]](#footnote-53) Only on the local level, it seems, is it still possible to pose the localized left as a critical antipode of the renewed power of the family, the clan, and the Church.

Also, art under neoliberalism is reduced to an instrumental tool. Its three main functions are to serve as a catalyst for gentrification, to keep intact the identity of the nation-state, and to be a commensurable vehicle of capital in the abstract global markets. Autonomous cultural production is pushed into the corner of community work and localist autonomism. Not that this pushing is uncomfortable: in individualized societies and competition-driven art worlds, it feels nice to do something based on sense of community and solidarity once again. In this perspective, the return to the scene – and thereby to independence based on local social embedding – is a sensible reaction to the current condition.

On the other hand, the preference of locality over globality is vernacularizing. In the midst of globalizing neoliberalism, centralizing media, austerity measures, and climate crisis, to simply go back to perspectives of local independence seems all too easy. What happens in cases where locality is pursued like this? When does the reduction of abstract problems to locality lead to overlocalization? The first problem of overlocalization is that going local is not attainable to everyone. Not everyone can afford a ‘digital detox’, nor does everyone have the time or means to practice permaculture or to do community art. Locality is just one more filter bubble, and what’s worse, it is mediated by privilege. It requires privilege to avoid social media and food packed in plastic. A second problem is a reduction of complex structural problems to individualized ethical-economic issues. ‘Organic’ is a profitable branding asset, selling to the consumer the choice to buy a better world. The social turn, too, is a prime example of overlocalization. Artistic production in the social turn is focused so much on local contextuality, that art itself has been reduced to social context. In the social turn, the role of locality has been reduced to a mere reactionary counterforce to globalization.

The book *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work,* byNick Srnicek and Alex Williams, is an attempt to finally and definitively put the discussion of localism versus globalism/universalism to rest. In it, the authors identify phenomena like overlocalization on the political left as *folk politics.* They define folk politics as:

A constellation of ideas and intuitions within the contemporary left that informs the common-sense ways of organising, acting, and thinking politics. […] At its heart, folk politics is the guiding intuition that immediacy is always better and often more authentic, with the collar being a deep suspicion of abstraction and mediation.[[54]](#footnote-54)

According to Srnicek and Williams, underneath the desire for immediacy and resistance of abstraction, lies the human desire for freedom. But, as the authors claim, the only viable way to uphold any prospect of liberation is exactly by long-term organization and tactical demands beyond folk politics. As discussed before while talking about commoning, micropolitics that fail to leap to macropolitics remains vernacular and will almost certainly be instrumentalized at some point.[[55]](#footnote-55) This is why Srnicek and Williams categorically reject folk politics and instead propose another way to deal with the rising complexities of neoliberalism and globalization. The left, they argue, should bond and focus on two simple but universal demands: full automation of work funded by the state and universal basic income.

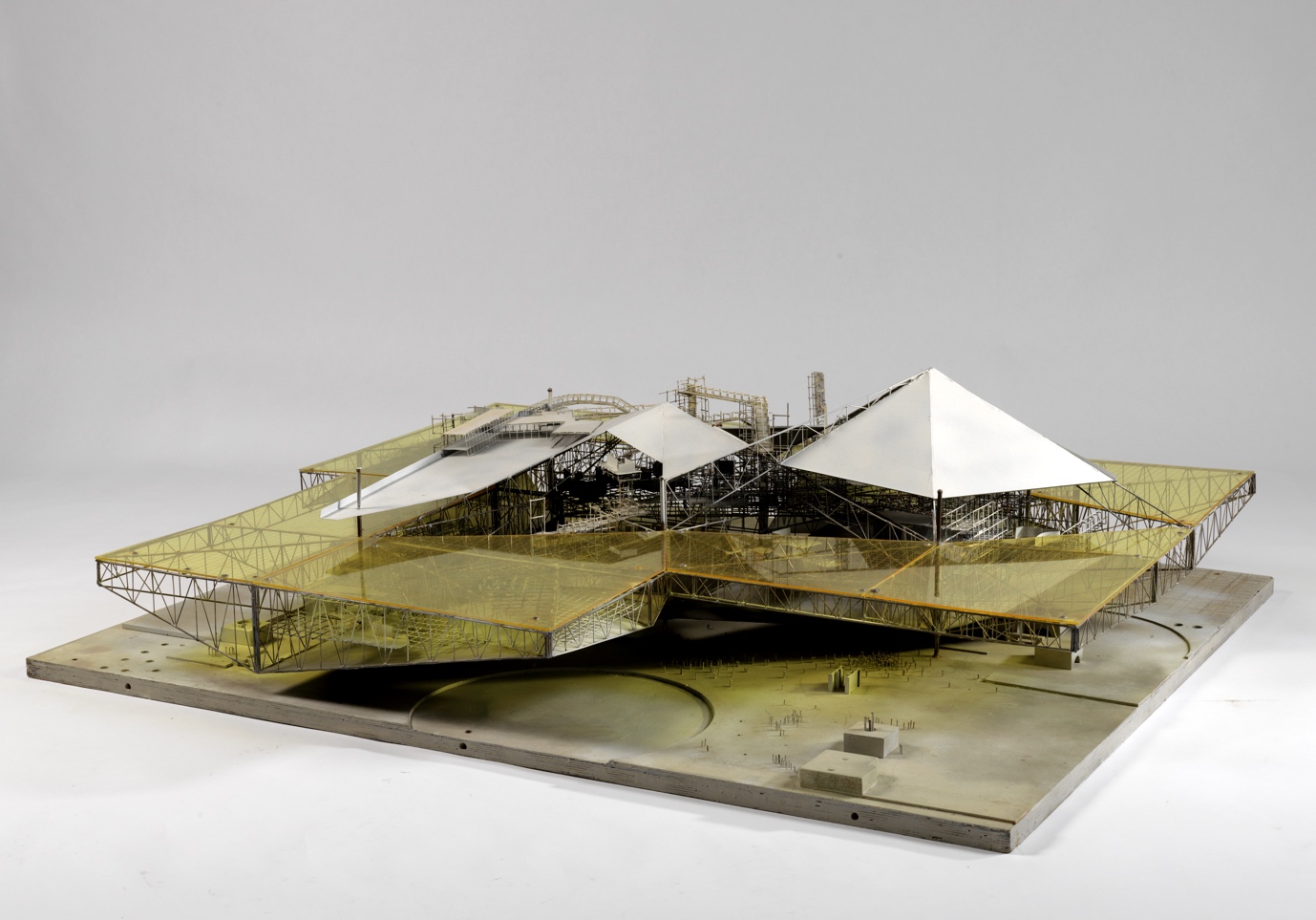
However nice as it might sound, the hope of automation as source of liberation held by Srnicek and Williams is also problematic. While they validly critique widespread techno-skepticism on the left, they fall into the trap of unbridled techno-optimism. Just imagine everyone having loads of free time and being liberated from family relationships as they exist now. What would happen to the world population? Where would all the recourses come from to feed all these mouths and to build the machines that should produce for them? Accelerationism, the school of thought in which Srnicek and Williams participate, simply brushes over the fact that full automation will deplete the earth in no-time. Also, what happens to the values of love and care in this scenario? Apart from that, accelerationism considers technology to be the neutral material that will create the condition for human freedom. But in the time of machine-learning dominated by algorithmic arrogance, there is no denying the social, cultural, and economical biases of technology. In many cases, technology is designed to solidify suppression rather than to lift it. Automated labor is a reality in Amazon distribution centers, where it combines a return to Fordist alienation with extreme precarity, and in the robot fields produced by Fanuc.



A Fanuc-automated car factory. There are two humans in this picture. Can you spot them?

*Inventing the Future* is thus not an economically, ecologically or even politically coherent manifesto, and its solutionism is probably overly utilitarian.[[56]](#footnote-56) Still, I think that itis a good book, mainly in being a strong provocation addressing the lack to collective imagination caused by the fear of the black box of technology. Publications like *Inventing the Future* and its successor *The Accelerationist Manifesto* have brought to the table critiques of localism and techno-skepticism and increased the popularity of cybernetics and accelerationism. Thereby, Srnicek and Williams have contributed to the re-emancipation of a long-standing and theoretically rich tradition of imagination.

The most intriguing art to have dealt with automation and a world without, and for me the highlight of cybernetics up until today, is Constant Nieuwenhuys’s *New Babylon* (1956-1969). Like the Russian Constructivists and the Lettrist International had done before him, the Dutch artist propagated the ‘unity of the arts’: the synthesis of painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, philosophy, and psychoanalysis into the design of lived urban environment – and, ultimately, the synthesis of art and life.[[57]](#footnote-57) He went about this grand idea with surprising pragmatism. With stainless steel, Perspex and bicycle spokes, Constant constructed scale models for collective living units without strict borders, which could be realized with materials available all around the world. He also made built environments and (détourned) geographical maps, drawings, paintings, tractates, lecture performances and a *New Babylon* newspaper.



Constant Nieuwenhuys, *Gele sector / Yellow Sector* of *New Babylon.* Collection Art Museum The Hague, photo by Tom Haartsen.

When combined, the various immersive iterations of *New Babylon* provide a peek into a post-capitalist world without work.[[58]](#footnote-58) In this world, all labour is automated and takes place in large underground factories. Above these factories, the surface of the earth is filled with nature, monuments of the old world and a vast network of highways. Even higher, 16 metres above the surface, the real, lived space of *New* *Babylon* arises. A network of connected platforms of 50 to 100 acres called ‘sectors’ spreads all over the globe, creating lines that are connections rather than borders. As labour is superfluous, and every product for personal use can be accessed at any time and place, humans are no longer bound to specific geographical areas. In *New Babylon*’s superstructure, humankind is liberated from all duty, free to live their lives playfully, nomadically, and creatively.

Importantly, *New Babylon* never pretended to be a blueprint for the world to come, nor even a sociological experiment. Rather, it is a Leitmotiv for humankind at its most playful. In 1970 Constant wrote:

New Babylon, perhaps, is not so much a picture of the future as a Leitmotiv, the conception of an all-comprehensive culture that is hard to comprehend because until now it could not exist, a culture that, for the first time in history, as a consequence of the automation of labor, becomes feasible although we do not yet know what shape it will take, and seems mysterious to us. Will man of the future be able to play his life?[[59]](#footnote-59)

Humans in *New Babylon* do nothing but play. Constant argues: no freedom without creativity, and no creativity without playfulness. He dubbed the inhabitants of New Babylon *homines ludentes,* drawing on Johan Huizinga’s book *Homo Ludens*.[[60]](#footnote-60) But the play-notion at stake goes back way further.

To trace the tradition of thought from which Constant’s idea stems, we have to go back to the very foundations of humanist aesthetics: the German Romantics. Friedrich Schiller’s *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen (A Series of Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man)* (1795)*,* written in the aftermath of the French Revolution,sets out to establish the importance of free, aesthetic contemplation and Bildung to the functioning of democratic societies.[[61]](#footnote-61) According to Rancière, the *Aesthetic Letters* are the foundational theory of the aesthetic regime. Indeed, they are an avid plea for the ability of the aesthetic faculty to dialectically think the contradiction between engagement in the world and ethical thought free from the world.

To Schiller, aesthetics and beauty are the only way to overcome the gap between two fundamental yet opposing human drives that tear humanity apart: *Formtrieb* and *Sinnestrieb.* Formtrieb, or form drive, is the urge to change and to satisfy human lusts. It is the iconoclastic and revolutionary drive. Sinnestrieb*,* or sensual drive, is the urge to find universal moral claims. The object of Sinnestrieb is all that is material, the category of *life*, being-in-time. The object of Formtrieb is *form*, that is to say, all forms and formal relationships. Morality is the result of Formtrieb*,* while being-in-the-world and being-of-nature is the result of Sinnestrieb*.* If a person or system focuses solely on either drive, they neglect half of their own being-human and will ultimately lose control over themselves. Hence, reason must accept the double ontology of humankind, and demand that both drives must be served equally well in order to be truly humane. This desired synthesized experience of Sinnestrieband Formtrieb, which Schiller calls *living form*, and in which humans are aware of both their physical being in time and moral being in freedom, can only be achieved once the domination of both drives is deflected and freedom is achieved.

The synthesis of Formtrieband Sinnestrieb dialectically constitutes an entirely new drive, *Spieltrieb.* In the realm of play, which is to Schiller entirely aesthetical, these drives are working together and prevent one another from dominating. Spieltriebannuls time *within time* and renders humans free both morally and physically. If humans can only be fully human by serving both drives, and if this can only be achieved through independence towards both, and if this, in turn, is only possible in the realm of free aesthetic play, Schiller’s thesis follows logically: ‘man [sic] only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully a human being when he plays*’.[[62]](#footnote-62)

What is interesting when comparing Schiller’s notion of aesthetics to other foundational aesthetic theories, like those of Immanuel Kant or Edmund Burke, is that Schiller is not concerned with the human faculty of disinterested pleasure conceived through the experience of beauty or the sublime.[[63]](#footnote-63) To Kant and Burke, aesthetics belongs to the realm of the senses and may simply remain there. Beauty and function are opposed and mutually exclusive. Those notions of disinterested pleasure led to the consumeristic notion of art pointed out by Boris Groys, in which spectators passively sit and wait to receive a dose of pleasant stimuli. But, in Schiller’s view, aesthetics is a crucial mediator between ethical judgment and practical urges, exactly because it is a free realm belonging to the senses. It is never simply disinterested, but always mediating between disinterest and functionality.

Back to *New Babylon.* The point is not simply that New Babylonians play all the time (even though that is true), but that the vision of *New Babylon* allows for aesthetic contemplation and the imagination of life as play. In the end, *New Babylon* is not about political demands (although it could be used to formulate them), but about ways to imagine freedom. Itis a humorous yet serious mind-game, always aware of its own status as a brainchild. The importance of cybernetics to this brainchild is that the embrace of technology and the promises of overproduction provide Constant with tools to think up a condition of material *independence.* Thanks to this hypothetical state of material independence, imagination is freed to performaesthetic contemplation and thinking freedom (meaning here: thinking the contraction between heteronomy and autonomy). *New Babylon*’s striking qualityis not so much its societal impact, but its aesthetic capacity to create complex constellations using cybernetics in a non-utilitarian way. Based on meticulous observations on the material condition of the world, this blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, and thereby creates the possibility of sensing the world differently.

### 3.5.2. Transvaluing the Translocal

Now, what does this tell us about independent culture, such as it takes place in the scene? Since Beat times, the scene has been a vehicle of translocality. As the production of local subcultures boiled over, providing exportable surplus value and the independence of entrepreneurial freedom, this local cultural surplus production was marketed and exported to the extent that scenes watered down and almost ceased existing altogether, except for those places where the cultural production remained vernacular and/or identitarian. This leaves a bleak situation: allowing overproduction to be instrumentalized is not great, but to avoid translocality and remain vernacular isn’t a viable alternative either. Then again, scenes simply do exist (people in urban contexts get together and create meaningful encounters, durable relations, and semi-porous social circuits of cultural production), so we have to figure out what to do with them. The question then becomes how to translocalize otherwise, without any overdetermination by the powers that be. How to transvalue local overproduction to recode the international?

I am still convinced that avoiding overdetermination requires avoiding the dominance of sociological categories. The scene, after all, is not just a locus of praxis prone to commodification. It is also a general mode of intelligibility that effaces the distinction between illustration and theory. In a time in which they seemingly should not exist anymore, scenes seem to constitute some kind of outside category. I don’t know whether they’re retromorphs, anomalies, or wonders. I just know that they exist as places of independence between autonomy and engagement, and that they are important. Just as Constant looked at the material circumstances of the world around him closely, in order to set himself free and think the contradiction between autonomy and engagement, looking closely at today’s world can set us free, so that we can playfully, independently transvalue the scene.

1. Laura Naum and Petrică Mogoș, ‘Dear Reader,’ *Kajet: a journal of Eastern European encounters* vol. 1, no. 2 (Autumn 2018), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Flajsig, interview by author, 12 March 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Medak, interview by author, 29 March 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Goran Sergej Pristaš, interview by author, 14 May 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Letinić, interview by author, 3 April 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1999), 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Spivak, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason,* 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Boris Buden during ‘Rad i jezik nakon prevodivih društava: Kratko predavanje Stefana Nowotnyja i razgovor s Borisom Budenom,’ Galerija Nova, 25 May 2018, <http://www.whw.hr/galerija-nova/radi-i-jezik-nakon-prevodivih-drustava.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘The Big Mac Index,’ *The Economist,* <https://www.economist.com/content/big-mac-index>, accessed 24 June 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Buden, ‘Rad i jezik nakon prevodivih društava: Kratko predavanje Stefana Nowotnyja i razgovor s Borisom Budenom.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Native Informant is the central figure in Gayatri Spivak’s *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason* and as such has been picked up by many postcolonial thinkers. Boris Buden and Dejan Kršić, interview by author, audio recorded interview, Kino Europa, 5 May 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This problematic conception of the native informant is unpacked in Sharareh Frouzesh, ‘The Politics of Appropriation: Writing, Responsibility, and the Specter of the Native Informant,’ *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature,* vol. 57 (2011), 252-268. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Shahnaz Khan, ‘Reconfiguring the Native Informant: Positionality in the Global Age,’ *Signs,* vol. 30, no. 4 (Summer 2005), 2018-2028. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sharareh Frousesh, ‘The Politics of Appropriation: Writing, Responsibility, and the Specter of the Native Informant,’ *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature,* vol. 57 (2011), 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ‘Moving base’ is a term employed by Spivak in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* to define the positional-methodological space for transnational examination of the vanishing present. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* x. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Sarat Maharaj, ‘Perfidious Fidelity: The Untranslatability of the Other,’ in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Arts,* Jean Fisher, ed. (London: Kala Press and the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Buden, ‘Rad i jezik nakon prevodivih društava,’ 25 May 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Boris Buden, ‘Translation after History: On Revernacularization of National Languages,’ *The Future of the Humanities and Anthropological Difference: Beyond the Modern Regime of Translation,* Cornell University, 10 July 2016, New York, <https://vimeo.com/174556290>. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Buden, ‘Translation after History.’ Buden borrows this term from the German linguist and philologist Jürgen Trabant. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. During the research and writing process, I have started learning Croatian, but my proficiency is nowhere close to mastering all seven conjugations and a good part of the Slavic vocabulary yet. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Foundational books on sovereignty in political theory from early to late modernity include: Jean Bodin, ‘De la souveraineté,’ in *Les six livres de la République* (Paris: Scientia, 1567), Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)*,* the works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (München & Leipzig: 1922). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Julia Kristeva, ‘A Mediation, a Political Act, an Art of Living,’ in *Psychoanalysis, Aesthetics, and Politics in the Work of Julia Kristeva,* eds. Kelly Oliver and S.K. Keltner (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 23-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For a good account of the Dutch squatter movement, see Adilkno, *Cracking the Movement: Squatting Beyond the Media*, trans. Laura Martz (New York: Autonomedia, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Vladimir Bukovsky, *To Build a Castle: My Life as a Dissenter* (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kristeva, ‘A Mediation, a Political Act, an Art of Living,’ 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kristeva, ‘A Mediation, a Political Act, an Art of Living,’ 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. George Bataille, ‘Sovereignty,’ *The Accursed Share*, vol 3. (New York: Zone Books, 1988 (1949)), 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Lesson of Rancière,’ in Jacques Rancière*, The Politics of Aesthetics,* Gabriel Rockhill, ed. and trans. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Jacques Rancière, ‘Time, Narration, Politics,’ in Modern Times: Essays on Temporality in Art and Politics (Zagreb: Multimedia Institute, 2017), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004 (2000)), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Nico Dockx and Pascal Gielen ‘Introduction: Ideology & Aesthetics of the Real,’ in *Commonism: A New Aesthetics of the Real* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018), 53-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Boris Groys, ‘Introduction: Poetics vs. Aesthetics,’ in *Going Public* (Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press and e-flux, 2010), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Groys, ‘Introduction: Poetics vs. Aesthetics,’ 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Groys, ‘Introduction: Poetics vs. Aesthetics,’ 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Groys, ‘Introduction: Poetics vs. Aesthetics,’ 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Claire Bishop, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,’ *Art Forum,* vol. 44, no. 6(February 2006), 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Bishop, ‘The Social Turn,’ 180. This insight would later be the starting point for Bishop’s seminal book *Artificial Hells* (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Bishop, ‘The Social Turn,’ 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Duncan Thomas, ‘The Politics of Art: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,’ *Verso,* 9 November 2015, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2320-the-politics-of-art-an-interview-with-jacques-ranciere>. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Rancière, ‘Time, Narration, Politics,’ 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Thomas, ‘The Politics of Art.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Euripides, *The Phoenician Women,* 411-409 B.C., as cited in Michel Foucault, ‘Parrhesia in the Tragedies of Euripides,’ second lecture of ‘Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia’, delivered between October and November 1983, at the University of California, Berkeley. This series of six lectures by Foucault in California in 1983 was dedicated entirely to the notion of parrhesia and the activity of speaking truth in the face of power, as it occurs in Greek tragedy and other texts from the Fifth Century BC to the Fifth Century AD. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Michel Foucault, ‘The Meaning and Evolution of the Word “Parrhesia”,’ first lecture of ‘Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia’, delivered between October and November 1983, at the University of California, Berkeley. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Michel Foucault, ‘Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia’, delivered between October and November 1983, at the University of California, Berkeley. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Michel Foucault, ‘The Meaning and Evolution of the Word “Parrhesia”.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics,* 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. John Bealle, ‘DIY Music and Scene Theory,’ Revision of paper presented at the meetings of  the Midwest Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology Cincinnati, Ohio, April 13, 2013, <https://www.academia.edu/4406896/DIY_Music_and_Scene_Theory>. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. With the observation of this replacement, Baudrillard refers to his psychoanalytical claim that ‘the schizophrenic can no longer produce himself as a mirror […] He is now himself a pure screen embedded itself in a “influent” network’. Isabel Millar, ‘Baudrillard: From the Self-Driving Car to the Ex-timacy of Communication?’ *Everyday Analysis,* 24 February 2019, <https://everydayanalysis.org/2019/02/24/baudrillard-from-the-self-driving-car-to-the-ex-timacy-of-communication/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See Evelyn Austin’s explication of Article 13 during the conference Urgent Publishing: New Strategies in Post-Truth Times, as I blogged about it on the website of the Institute of Network Cultures: <http://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2019/05/29/memes-as-means/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (New York & London: Verso, 2015), 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Srnicek and Williams do not discuss commoning whatsoever. In his review of *Inventing the Future,* Joseph P. Moore states that Srnicek’s and Williams’s argument against wage labor ‘ties in with the historical and ongoing popular struggles against the enclosure of the commons whose existence has enabled to resist being forced into wage labor. Surprisingly, Srnicek and Willams have little to say about those defensive battles, perhaps because their often rural and agrarian character does not fit so well with Srnicek’s and Williams’s high tech and urban-oriented political program and imaginary.’ Joseph P. Moore, ‘Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*: Reviewed by Joseph P Moore,’ *Marx and Philosophy,* 13 November 2016, <https://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviews/8206_inventing-the-future-review-by-joseph-p-moore/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. For instance, Jonny Elling’s review in *The Oxonian Review* critiques Srnicek and Williams for overlooking theory of value, which allegedly leads to inconsistencies in their argumentation. Jonny Elling, ‘Inventing the Future,’ *The Oxonian Review,* 9 May 2016, <https://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/inventing-the-future/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. On the ‘absolute unity of the arts’, see, Constant, ‘From Collaboration to Absolute Unity Among the Plastic Arts,’ trans. Robyn de Jong-Dalziel, *NOT BORED!*, accessed 27 June, 2019, <http://www.notbored.org/absolute-unity.html>. On the relationship between the Lettrist International and Russian Constructivism with Constant, see Laura Stamps, ‘Constants New Babylon: Pushing the Zeitgeist to Its Limits,’ in *Constant New Babylon: Aan ons de vrijheid,* eds. Els Brinkman, Sandra Darbé Laura Stamps and Hadewych van den Bossche, (Den Haag: Gemeentemuseum Den Haag and Hannibal, 2016), 12-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Constant, ‘New Babylon,’ *NOT BORED!*, accessed 27 June 2019, <http://www.notbored.org/new-babylon.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Constant, ‘New Babylon: The World of Homo Ludens,’ *NOT BORED!*, accessed 28 June 2019, <http://www.notbored.org/homo-ludens.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1944 (1938)). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (New York: Courier Corporation, 2012 (1795)). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 58. Original italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. The major works of aesthetic theories by these philosophers, which Schiller critiques, are Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Immanuel Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)